

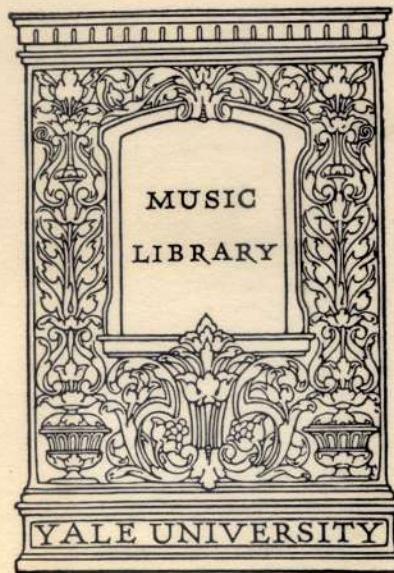
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**NEGRO  
•FOLK•  
SONGS  
as SUNG by  
•LEAD•  
BELLY**

**JOHN A. and  
ALAN LOMAX**



THE GIFT OF  
**Marshall Bartholomew**

Marshall Bartholomew  
1976

**NEGRO FOLK SONGS  
AS SUNG BY LEAD BELLY**



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TORONTO



Photograph by Otto Hesse

*"Ol' Howard's dead and gone,  
Lef' me here to sing this song."*

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# Negro Folk Songs As Sung by Lead Belly

"KING OF THE TWELVE-STRING GUITAR PLAYERS  
OF THE WORLD," LONG-TIME CONVICT IN THE  
PENITENTIARIES OF TEXAS AND LOUISIANA

TRANSCRIBED, SELECTED AND EDITED BY

JOHN A. LOMAX

AND

ALAN LOMAX

Compilers of "American Ballads and Folk Songs"

New York · The Macmillan Company · Mcmxxxvi

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TO TWO FRIENDS

Orville Bullington of Wichita Falls, Texas  
Henry Zweifel of Fort Spunky, Texas

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## INTRODUCTION

DURING two years of search in nine southern states for folk songs to be recorded on aluminum discs and placed in the Library of Congress, my son Alan and I have met many interesting characters. Especially has this been true in the penitentiaries of these states—for among Negro convicts we found such songs in greatest number, variety, and purity. Every state yielded new tunes, new songs, and charming vocalists. Some of the songs are sung throughout the South; some are limited to sections; still others seem to be the possession of individuals.

At Angola, Louisiana, the seat of the State Penitentiary, we found a Negro convict so skillful with his guitar and his strong, baritone voice that he had been made a "trusty" and kept around Camp "A" headquarters as laundryman, so as to be near at hand to sing and play for visitors. Huddie Ledbetter—called by his companions Lead Belly—was unique in knowing a very large number of tunes, all of which he sang effectively while he twanged his twelve-string guitar. He called himself "de King of de twelve-string guitar players ob de world." Many of his songs he claimed to have "composed." (Such songs as he sang are variously known among the Negroes as "made-up," or "sinful" songs. Another term is "reels"—to distinguish them from the well known "spirituals.") Alan and I were looking particularly for the song of the Negro laborer, the words of which sometimes reflect the tragedies of imprisonment, cold, hunger, heat, the injustice of the white man. Fortunately for us and, as it turned out, fortunately for him, Lead Belly had been fond of this type of songs.

Through a twist of circumstances, just a month after our second visit to Angola, Lead Belly was set free. I was to learn later that this

## Introduction

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was his second release from prison; that he had served time in a Texas penitentiary for murder; that he had thrice been a fugitive from justice; that he was the type known as "killer," and had had a career of violence the record of which is a black epic of horrors.

Six weeks after his release from Angola he was driving my car as I wandered over the South. Soon Alan joined us, and the three of us journeyed to New York City. Precisely six months from the day he stood, a friendless penitentiary Negro dressed in convict stripes, and sang for us, his name was in the headlines of New York City papers. His criminal record was securing a hearing for a Negro musician. We lived together for three months in and near New York.

In this book we present his life's story and some of our novel experiences with him. We print the story of his life before he met us, told in his own words, and we offer forty-nine of the songs he sang for us, together with the background of these songs, again, in many instances, in Lead Belly's vernacular.

As a musician Lead Belly is an example of the type of Negro men who earn money through their musical ability; here today and there tomorrow, performers for shifting audiences. Some of these men play at night—often all night—sleep through the day, and follow no other occupation; others do some labor, using their musical skill to supplement their income. They are the legitimate successors to far greater numbers, preceding them, who followed the same profession.

After the Civil War had freed the Negroes and they were faced with the difficult task of adjusting themselves to the changed economic life of the South, some turned to music as one means of earning money. During the week these singers, fiddlers, guitar players, and banjo pickers serenaded their white friends in the evenings, while on Saturday, "nigger day," when everyone comes to town, they made music on shady street corners. To their white listeners one of the musicians always passed the hat for contributions; their Negro hearers, as today in their churches, preferred to walk up, so that all could see, and lay their money down. Among the musicians was usually a "back stepper" who would close the program with a lively dance. Every town supported such a group, each city many groups.

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Not all their engagements were under ideal conditions. The dance hall, for whites and for blacks, saloons, bawdyhouses, dives of all sorts, gave employment to these groups. Also they traveled from town to town, sometimes holding their concerts in halls with an admission charge at the door, in some instances visiting the big cities north of the Mason and Dixon Line. A courageous and musically gifted individual might travel alone, leading a semi-vagrant life. Many such musicians and "songsters," some blind, still wander through the South. From these beginnings finally came the Negro minstrel troupes with programs largely imitating the white burnt-cork artists, though they also preserved some of the melodies inherited from former generations.

Lead Belly, born in 1885, in his early years escaped the influence of jazz, though his inheritance was rich from the Negro minstrel class. Even the "blues" came later. Living in the country, he first learned simple tunes set to stories about taking water to thirsty plowmen, of picking cotton, of shooting a goose flying South—songs dealing with nature, sung by men at work in the fields. He was never free from this influence. The country play party and the country dance, especially the latter, also furnished him their quota of tunes. In fact, most of his songs are for dancing, and as a master of the dance he has been forced to keep up, more or less, with the development of popular music.

Lead Belly, according to Dr. George Herzog of Columbia University, has inherited the large bulk of his song material. "More than half of these melodies and texts have been published in other collections, in some other version. Others are of white parentage, some are white tunes pure and simple." But since Lead Belly learned them all from hearing other people sing them, and practiced most of them for years in isolated penitentiaries, we may feel pretty sure that his tunes are not precisely like other versions.

"I'm thinkin' in my heart," once Lead Belly said when we asked him why, when he was about to sing, he sat so quiet. That was his way before an audience—to sit silent and relaxed, this man of terrible energy, turning over in his mind God alone knows what thoughts; then, at the signal, to let loose his hands and his voice. He

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crouched over his guitar as he played, as his fingers made the incredibly swift, skillful runs; and he sang with an intensity and passion that swayed audiences who could not understand a single word of his songs. His eyes were tight-shut so that between his eyebrows there appeared deep furrows of concentration curving back like devil's horns. One foot kept the beat steady while the other accented it. Lead Belly had thought in his heart, the words and music leapt out of his brooding relaxation, his whole being focused in a song.

Lead Belly believed completely that his way of singing was the best way. Every song that had come to his hand he had changed, because he wanted the song to become distinctively his own. Every melody he had consciously adapted to his own style, tricked out with his ornaments and his guitar accompaniments. The interpolated remarks between stanzas that he called "talkin'" arose out of his creative urge, this thinking in his heart. He wanted to "explain to the peoples what the songs is about," to fill in the gaps that the fragmentary and sometimes enigmatic rhymes of his people have left, to give pattern and sequence to the usually jumbled collections of stanzas that make up their blues.

These interpolations were not spoken, but chanted to the accompaniment of the dominant chord of the song he happened to be singing. Perhaps Lead Belly was imitating the manner of the ordinary country Negro preacher, who chants, sometimes almost sings, his sermon when he is deeply moved.

Dr. Herzog thinks that Lead Belly has claims for consideration as a musical composer also, mentioning as special examples the songs "Governor O. K. Allen," "Elnora" and "Mister Tom Hughes's Town." He succeeds in identifying the parent tunes of the first two, and adds that "Mister Tom Hughes's Town" "seems a more authentic composition in our sense, providing the tune is actually new. A search through collections of Negro songs has not disclosed a similar melody so far."

"In the making of his spirituals," adds Dr. Herzog, "the Negro has been more actively creative than the latest views assume. We ought not to picture him copying a melody or picking it up indiscrimi-

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nately, but rather remodeling it with artistry so distinctive that the child is more pleasing than the parent." In this sense, it seems to the writer, Lead Belly fashioned many of his most impressive tunes. He did not create the original musical core; but his added adornments and modifications, especially the tricks of his guitar accompaniments, give him some right to say, "I made dat up." "Another distinctive type of song, Lead Belly's 'holler,'" thinks Dr. Herzog, "sounds most different from all occidental music—more even than the blues."

From Lead Belly we secured about one hundred songs that seemed "folky," a far greater number than from any other person. In addition, he knew many more of the popular sort, current now or in other years. His eleven years of confinement had cut him off both from the phonograph and from the radio. According to his own claim he knew five hundred songs learned by "word of mouth." He carried in his head all these words and tunes. We saw no printed page of music either in his prison cell or in his home.

We present this set of songs, therefore, not as folk songs entirely, but as a cross-section of Afro-American songs that have influenced and have been influenced by popular music; and we present this singer, not as a folk singer handing on a tradition faithfully, but as a folk artist who contributes to the tradition, and as a musician of a sort important in the growth of American popular music. We give at once the colorful, personal background of Negro "sinful songs" and the "life and works" of an artist \* who happened to be born with a black skin and with Negro barrel-house life, convict life and folk-lore for his artistic material.

The main body of the song-texts consists of transcriptions from records we made with an instantaneous aluminum recording machine, the property of the Archive of American Folk-Song of the Library of Congress. This machine and these records were used through the courtesy of the Library of Congress. Dr. George Herzog transcribed the melodies, as herein printed, from these same discs.

\* Musicians may smile, but we will let the word stand.

## Introduction

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We believe that this volume contains the most interesting of Lead Belly's songs. At the last moment considerations of economy constrained us to cut out certain songs. Lead Belly's songs on commercial records: "Match Box Blues," titled "Packin' Trunk"; "I'm All Out an' Down," titled "All Out an' Down"—record number M13326. "'Fo'-Day Worry Blues," titled "Four Day Worry"; "New Black-snake Moan"—record number M13327.

The editors acknowledge with thanks the coöperation and help of the following persons: Henry Zweifel and William Ayers, Fort Spunky, Texas; A. L. Burford, Texarkana, Texas; Lincoln Barnett, *New York Herald Tribune*; Professor Edward Crane, University of Texas; Harold Spivacke and Edward N. Waters, Division of Music, Library of Congress; George Herzog, Ph.D., Columbia University; Mrs. Elnora Levison and Bess Brown Lomax, Austin, Texas; Mrs. Shirley Mansell, Lubbock, Texas; Clarence Williams, New York City; and Mrs. Martha Promise Ledbetter, Shreveport, Louisiana. But for Martha and her charm and unfailing good humor, this book would not have been possible.

PART I  
THE "WORLDLY NIGGER" \*

\* This pronunciation, "nigger," is almost universal among Negro laborers in the southern states. Lead Belly invariably thus referred to himself and other blacks. The *d* is silent in "worldly."

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## LEAD BELLY'S CHRONOLOGY\*

- 1885, Born near Mooringsport, Louisiana.
- 1900, Birth of daughter, Arthur Mae.
- 1901, Lead Belly puts on "long pants" and visits Fannin Street, Shreveport.
- 1901-1918, Lead Belly married Lethe; worked in and around Dallas and Fort Worth, Texas; farmed near New Boston, Texas; "rambled," principally.
- 1918, June 7, Entered Texas penitentiary under name of Walter Boyd for a term of thirty years. Convicted of murder and assault to kill.
- 1925, January 15, pardoned by Governor Pat M. Neff. Served six years, seven months, and eight days.
- 1925-1926, Worked in Buick agency, Houston, Texas.
- 1926-1930, Lived near Mooringsport, Louisiana, worked for Gulf Refining Company in that town.
- 1930, February 28, Entered Louisiana penitentiary for a term of ten years, convicted of assault with intent to murder.
- 1934, August 1, Reprieved by Governor O. K. Allen. Served four years, five months, and two days.
- 1934, September 15, Started to New York City.
- 1934, December 31, Arrived in New York City.
- 1935, January 21, Married Martha Promise at Wilton, Connecticut.
- 1935, March 26, Left New York City for Shreveport, Louisiana.

\* The day Lead Belly married Martha, January 21, 1935, was his birthday, so he said. On that day he was fifty years old. Lead Belly first announced, also on that day, that his age was forty-six. These statements are not consistent. Neither was Lead Belly, at least not always.

## LEAD BELLY TELLS HIS STORY

I ain' good-lookin', ain' got no great long hair,  
But I got ways, pretty mamma, take me each an' everywhere.

HUDDIE LEDBETTER was born about 1885 not far from Caddo Lake and Mooringsport, Louisiana, near the Texas-Louisiana line. Thirty miles southeast on the Kansas City Southern Railway was Shreveport, Louisiana, a big sprawling southern city.

"My papa was rentin' over in Lou's'ana when he got married. He moved to Texas an' went in on halvers wid a colored man an' dey had some trouble an' papa had to beat de man up pretty bad, so he move down an' rent from ol' man Henry Simms, what owned three or fo' thousan' acres near Caddo Lake. Ol' man Simms was a noble ol' colored man. He liked my papa an' gin him de bes' en' o' ev'ything. When I was 'bout ten, papa bought sixty-eight acres lan' f'om ol' Dr. Waskom, in Boulder, Texas. Dis lan' was near Caddo Lake, some of it hill an' some of it lake level, but de hill was as good as de lake. Dat year, after he had laid by his crop on ol' man Simms' place, my papa went over an' cleared up 'nough lan' for a crop on his new farm. An' ev'y year he kep' on clearin' lan'. He'd be out till one, two 'clock in de mawn'n', him an' mamma, wid us two chillun \* 'sleep at de house, burnin' brush an' cuttin' trees. Sometime I'd wake up at night way late, an' watch de fires burnin' off dere in de bottom. Yassuh, my papa he was a wuckah. I reckon I got it from him to be such a good wuckah in de penitenshuh." †

In a country of share-croppers and large plantations, like the Red

\* Lead Belly and his adopted sister.

† Sometimes Lead Belly spoke in dialect, sometimes he didn't. At times his dialect varied, and his manner of speech changed noticeably during the six months of travel with us.

River bottom country, old man Wess Ledbetter was conspicuous for his independence and success. He had risen from the position of a renter to that of a small landowner. He voted at every election—always the Republican ticket. The whites of his community respected him, and the sheriff was always easy on his son. Huddie was his only child, and the old man and his half-Indian wife Sallie both spoiled him.

"Nawsuh, my papa an' mamma was *too* fine to me. They never touched me to whip me. One time when I was a little thing—couldn't been more'n seven years old—my mamma tried to whip me an' my papa knocked her down. He had her down slappin' her an' I retch an' got the poker i'on an' hit him on de back his head, *ki-bop!* He got up an' commence a-cussin'. 'I ought to whip you myself, you damn little rascal.' But I drew back wid dat poker an' stood dere an' say, 'Don' you touch mamma no mo'.'

"An' you know I broke 'em from fightin'! Mamma an' papa would be talkin' at de table, an' mamma would say somepin' papa didn't like. (She never did call him no liar, like womens will dey mens nowadays, but she would con'dict him.) He would hit her side de head, *Bop!*—knock her clean 'cross de room. We chilluns 'ould be under de table waitin' what would happen, an' they'd be at each other, fightin'. But soon's I got to be some size, I broke 'em of dat squabblin'.

"When I got big enough an' I'd hear 'em commence to pass hard words, I'd go over by de do' an' stan' where I could reach papa's shotgun. I wouldn't say nothin', I'd jes' stan' dere lookin' an' listenin', right where I could reach dat shotgun. Papa would notice me, an' he'd say, 'Aw, gwan, you crazy ol' woman, hush yo' mouf.' But he wouldn't lay a han' on her."

So the little Huddie, who looked so like his half-Indian mother, lorded it at home. At school he was the cock of the walk, always picking fights and, with his fierce strength and courage, usually turning up the winner. And even at school he was not whipped. He was so ambitious and so alive with intelligence that his teachers could not afford to give him the lickings he probably deserved. At home at night his heavy-handed black father went over his "books" with him

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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under the light of a kerosene lamp. Except for his diligence at his studies, however, Huddie was, in his own words, "an' awful bad boy." \*

He had grown up with Margaret, a neighbor's daughter, and she admired him. They went to "plays" and parties and church together. When he was fifteen she had a child by him. The community was much upset. The boys of his own age were jealous, the girls fearful and a little adoring, the old folks angry and resentful. His parents, hoping great things for him, would not allow him to be forced into an early marriage, but his school days were over. He went to work on his father's farm. In the meantime Margaret continued to love him, and a year later she was again pregnant. Huddie, perhaps grown wiser in the interval, perhaps in all innocence, denied that he was responsible; but this time the community had turned against him. Soon he would have to leave Mooringsport.

His father, who could not sing but loved singing, his mother, who led the church choir, and his two uncles Bob and Terrell Ledbetter, who were both "songsters," encouraged him to be a musician. "I got my accordion when I was a leetle bitty fellow. My uncle Terrell Ledbetter, which now lives in Terrell, Texas, he brought it to me ridin' on de back of an ol' mule f'm Mornin'spo't. I was settin' on de front po'ch when he come ridin' up, an' when he give it to me I was so glad I natchully jump an' shout. Den I turn aroun' an' get on that thing an' begin to whip it down. I set up an' played dat accordion *all* night long. Every once in a while papa, he would raise up and say, 'Son, aincha fixin' to lie down?' But I was a-whipping it down to de groun'. I kep' on like that till I was as good as dey had on a win-jammer." For Lead Belly, growing up near the "Cajun" country that stretched east and south of Shreveport to the Gulf, the "wind-jammer" was easy to get, since it was and is the favorite instrument among the Louisiana French folk. However, when sixteen years had lengthened his legs, the guitar had become popular among the Negroes of that part of the country.

"When I got to be a right big boy I used to follow Bud Coleman

\* Lead Belly made this statement before Martha and refused to explain then what he meant. He was likely thinking of some sexual precosity.

and Jim Fagin; they had a guitar, an' look like I di'n' care 'bout nothin' but to hear 'em play. I'd come home way late at night from a party where they been playin', an' I couldn't sleep for thinkin' 'bout th' music. Finally, I come home one day an' beg papa to git me a guitar, an' de very nex' day he hitch up an' go to town an' buy me one; an' when he give it to me, glory to God, I was gone some. I jump down an' commence a-whippin' it to a plank. Didn't sleep all night foolin' wid dat guitar. Fust piece I learnt was name 'Po' Howard—I learnt it f'm Jim Fagin. Nex' piece was 'Green Corn,' an' I learn it from Bud Coleman. Sometime I'd go off an' I'd hear me a song I like right well. That night I'd come home wid dat song on my min', an' I'd sit right down wid my box an' try to play it. If it wouldn't come to me right then, I'd go lay down an' sleep. In de night sometime it would ring in my head, an' I'd jump right outa de bed an' 'gin to whip dat tune on my li'l' box."

Certainly young Mozart was no more absorbed in music than young, black Huddie Ledbetter.

When his fame had spread round, he began to play for parties and dances over the countryside. Old man Wess Ledbetter, watching him go off night after night—this only son of whom he was so proud—was worried. He had been to dances, and he knew they were the scenes of frequent and bloody fights.

"Wasn't nothin' my mamma an' papa wouldn't do for me, wasn't nothin' dey wouldn't buy me, if I wanted it. When I got 'bout fifteen years ol' an' 'gin to go 'round' to de suckey-jumps \* an' what you call breakdowns † in de bottom, my papa bought me a Puttection Special Colt fit under my coat in a scabbid. He tol' me, says, 'Now, son, don' you bodder nobody, don' make no trouble; but if somebody try to meddle wid you, I want you to puttect yo'se'f.' He bought me a bran-new hoss an' saddle, too—you know, hosses was in style den, jus' like late-model cars is now—an' you know I felt mighty proud ridin' down de road on my bran-new hoss wid my new saddle screakin' so ev'ybody could know, an' my pistol in its scabbid under my arm. I felt like a man, sho' 'nough.

\* Parties.

† Square dances.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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"One night at a sucker-jump me an' a gal I was goin' wid had fix it up for me to take her home ridin' behin' me on de hoss. Was another boy who thought dis gal oughta like him, an' he had a bran-new buggy; an' he thought 'cause he had dis new buggy dat he oughta could ac' de boss over de whole worl'. He learn' better. Well, me an' my buddy an' dis gal come out de front do' ready to go home, an' dis nigger come rushin' up an' say, 'Come along, Eula Lee, an' I'll take you home in my new buggy.' Eula Lee was de gal's name, say, 'Nawsuh, thank you kin'ly, mister, but I'se promised to go home wid Huddie.' He swell up an' say, 'Dat's one nigger ain' gonna take you nowhere.' An' he grab de gal by her arm an' try to pull her off de po'ch. Well, she throw her other arm roun' my wais' an' pull till we drag him up on de po'ch. I didn' say nothin', but I ease my han' to my pistol under my coat an' listen at him while he talk big. When his big had got too big, I came down wid my pistol 'side his head, *Whop!* an' when he fell back I jump astraddle of him an' fire dat gun right in his face. But it didn' go off. Had hit a bad cateridge. He saw dat gun and was up an' gone. I throw de pistol down on him an' give it to him twice, *Zow! Zow!* But he was already 'roun' de corner de house.

"Den I put dat gal up on my horse an' me an' my buddy went on home. I wen' right to my papa an' tol' him what happen, an' he goes to de sheriff. But he didn' beat dat boy's mamma an' papa. Dey had got dere befo' him, cryin' an' holl'n' like somebody done got kill. But de sheriff knew my papa anyhow an' wouldn' do me nothin' but fine me twenty-five dollahs fo' carryin' concealed weepons."

Now everything pointed to Fannin Street. His Protection Special Colt, his sexual precocity, his swaggering mannishness, even the songs he sang, suggested Shreveport and the red-light district. He wanted to try himself out. "They didn' 'low you down dere wid no shawt pants on. So I had been wantin' to go down there all my life, an' soon's my mamma put long pants on me, I flew out de do.' When you git long pants, you oughta ac' like a man, ef you ain' no man." His heart ached for Fannin Street. Something in his music, perhaps, had made him feel there were more exciting experiences in the way

## Negro Folk Songs

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of womankind than Margaret and the other timid young girls of Mooringsport. He had to break away from home. He had to break his mother's heart. He was tired of his little puddle, and he felt he had to be the big frog in a bigger and more exciting one. So he told his mamma,

I tol' my mamma,  
"Mamma, you don' know—  
Women in Shrevepo't gonna kill me, might well's to let me go."

They nearly killed him. Lead Belly was sick for six months afterwards. But Lead Belly didn't die. After three months he grew impatient with the doctor's slowness and went to an old woman who cured him with Lafayette's mixture.\*

Lead Belly, then, at sixteen had become in little the man he wanted to be and was to be. He was the best guitar-picker and songster in his part of the country. He was feared and respected by all the men who knew him, because he carried a pistol and was known to have an ugly temper. He was completely competent in a fight, with a terrible and calculating anger. He was thoroughly disliked by most of the men who knew him, because of his pride, his success, his conceit, and his way with women. He was already a father. Any woman on Fannin Street would be proud to keep him in idleness because of his guitar, his voice and his charm. In going to Fannin Street he had broken away from home and his mother, and during his period of sickness he had matured. He had grown out of his short pants and away from Mooringsport. It was time for him to leave; especially because of the way Margaret's parents were threatening him.

After helping his father with the farm for a while, he went off. Where he went and what happened to him, neither Alan nor I have been able to discover. He himself claims that he went to Bishop College, in Marshall, Texas, for a year and a half and then quit to get married; but that story is doubtful.

The stretch of the next sixteen or seventeen years is dark and

\*A remedy invented in this country about the time of Lafayette's first visit and named in honor of him. Lead Belly believes in it absolutely, and is quite proud of his record as an unofficial practitioner.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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vague and singularly empty of detail. At the end of that time, May 24, 1918, according to the records of the Texas prison system, we find him standing before the judge in the courthouse of Bowie County, in New Boston, Texas, receiving a sentence of thirty years at hard labor in the Texas penitentiary on two counts, murder and assault to murder.

There are, however, across these sixteen years, a few things that we can be fairly sure of. Some time soon after he left Mooringsport, Lethe \* married him. They moved to Dallas and lived together thereabouts for some years. In the summer Huddie and his wife would go out into the blackland counties east of Dallas, to Terrell or to Rockwall, and work by the day on the rich farms of that section of Texas. In his own words Huddie was "de bes' cotton picker dat country ever saw. Wouldn't wuck but five days a week an' den pick mo' cotton dan any two niggers wuckin' six. An', man, could I plow! I'd wear out two teams o' mules a day an' den dance all night an' den see de gals taken care of." After a summer plowing and a fall of cotton picking, Lethe and Huddie would come back into Dallas and live easy all winter. Usually Lethe would get some soft job, and when they needed extra change Huddie could always pick up a few dollars in an evening of guitar playing. On one of these evenings he wandered into a saloon with his guitar and met Blind Lemon Jefferson, a famous blues singer and guitar picker. They soon joined forces and, with Huddie's mandolin and Blind Lemon's Hawaiian guitar, they made a good living in the saloons and red-light district of East Dallas. Certainly Lead Belly learned a lot about music from Blind Lemon.

Later, gathering a group of musicians about him, Lead Belly wandered through the residential section of Dallas serenading "the rich white folks." In that company he was the star and would play the guitar, the mandolin, the accordion, the mouth-harp and the bass fiddle by turns.

One night at a traveling circus he saw a man playing a twelve-string guitar. All evening he hung about the tent and listened to this

\* Pronounced as the famous river of forgetfulness.

## Negro Folk Songs

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fine, loud, complex sound, and the next morning as soon as the stores opened, Lead Belly bought a twelve-string for his own. Then, as he had hoped, he became the king sure enough. He had more whisky than he could drink, more money than he could put into his pockets, and more women than he could possibly ever make love to.

For a while he lived this easy life, his days filled with whisky, women, and music.

By this time, then, Lead Belly's attitude toward women had become completely arrogant and domineering. He kept one at home to clean his house and give him comfort when the world turned sour on him, and he believed that all other women belonged to him by rights. The truculent Dallas prostitutes had nearly chopped his head off because of his swaggering "I wouldn't give two bits for you," but he had learned little from this experience. And in Marshall somewhat later he attacked a woman who turned him down. He got a year on the Harrison County chain gang.

The third morning Lead Belly noticed that the guard was surly. He saw the man bring his bridle reins down across the heads and necks of the men who didn't please him, and Lead Belly, although he was sure that the way he worked would save him from any ill treatment, didn't like the prospect of being hit. No one had ever struck him and got away with it. Lead Belly spraddled his legs to see how much of a stride he could make with the chain hampering, tightened his lips, and edged slowly to the end of the gang. The guard turned his back and yawned, and Lead Belly was over the fence, tearing across the plowed field. Fifty yards separated him from the gang before the chain clinked, the guard whirled his horse, and, whipping his Winchester from its scabbard, began to fire. The bullets whizzed around Lead Belly's ears and he forgot about the chain and the plowed ground. He ran. A few seconds more, and he was safe in the woods.

He kept pouring on across the country for a mile before he came upon a Negro man plowing in a lonely field. "Will you cut my chains, buddy?" "Nawsuh! Pass by, nigger, pass by!" He ran on and over the next hill, he found a group of Negro men and women hoeing.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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They helped him. An ax blade bit through the chain. It was buried and Lead Belly said "Bye-bye." Now he heard the dogs behind him and his stride felt light and free, with the chains gone. "I jus' skim de groun'?" A mile more and he was wading up a creek. He floundered up through the shallows for four or five hundred yards, scrambled out, ran for a half-mile more to the top of the nearest hill and sat down for a blow while he listened to the hounds scattering through the woods, circling back, and then setting up the confused, clamorous yelping of a pack of hounds off the scent. He sat quiet and smiled as he heard the guards come up, scatter the hounds, the packs gather again futilely, and at last the sound of the whole party sifting away into the woods. Lead Belly rose and stretched, and felt pleased with himself. He started at an easy dogtrot for his father's farm.

Old man Wess Ledbetter hid his son in the cane patch during the three days Lead Belly was around the place. A couple of hours after Lead Belly left for New Orleans, the sheriff rode up; but the last old man Wess had heard of Lead Belly was that he was in the chain gang. "You're a damned old liar," said the sheriff, and rode away.

Lead Belly didn't like New Orleans. "You go down Rampart Street an' you liable to see anything. You see a man without no legs an' a woman doesn't have a nose. Nex' come a man wid his mouf jes' a hole in he face. Yassuh, you gonna see ev'y diffunt kind o' thing down yonder on Rampart Street in New Orleans." He stayed three days and came back up into his own country. Lethe was waiting for him at his father's place and he moved with her up into the sandy land near De Kalb, Bowie County, Texas. Walter Boyd was his name then, and he and Lethe worked a little rent place and made a good living. Still the blood ran warm in his veins. The excitement of Dallas and the fast Dallas women, the "noted riders," made him restless. He rambled, and his desire for women increased. He sang about them; his body, sucking up strength from the ground, demanded them, and he needed more and more to reassure himself. The twelve-string box was with him, but he couldn't allow his fame to be "spreaded around," with the Marshall sheriff only seventy-five miles away. He rambled.

"Yassuh, I used to be terrible wid womens, terrible rough. I'd treat 'em ev'y whichaway. An' I'se had trainloads ob 'em, trainloads, sometime eight or ten at a dance. Used to be when I'd take a woman in my car, I'd put her right out if she wouldn't be wid me, put her out no matter how fur she was f'om home an' make her walk. (Way it is wid gals these times, they think you sick or they gonna get mad wid you if you don't take some jelly-roll.) Woman be in my car an' wouldn't be wid me, I'd tell her, say, 'Well, you can step right on outa my car, then. 'Lowin' me to take you where you wants to go in a five or seven hund'ed dollar automobile an' then you won't commo-date me a little! Well, you can jus' walk! Git out, you goddam nappy-headed bitch, git out!' An' I'd shove her out no matter what she said to me an' be gone down the road an' leave her holl'in' after me.

"I was goin' wid a gal, once, an' she ask me to lend her five dollars to git home on from where she was at. She says she be nice to me when we both git back home. All right, I gives her de five. But when I goes over to her house, seem like they was always some other man there. Never could get no talk wid her noway. Went there five or six times an' she always had company. Well, I goes over there my las' time one day, an' I was mad. They's 'nother one of her men aroun', but I goes in anyhow. I hollers for her, an' she come an' she ask me, 'What *you* want, Walter?' (Womens are de wussest anyhow. They be sweet an' lovin' till they gets yo' money, but when they got you bent, dat's de las' you gonna see ob 'em. They ain't gonna pay you no min'. Well, dat's somepin' I won't stand. If they fool wid me, I'm gonna learn 'em. I got 'em some.) Well, I says to de gal, 'Baby, I jes' wants to see you a minute.' So here she comes, all swelled up, actin' like I wanted to collect de rent, an' I say to her, 'You remember I give you five dollars an' you said you gonna be nice to me? Well, looks like ev'y time I come aroun' yo' house, you got a man. I ain't gonna stan' for it. I wants my money or I wants my somepin' else.' She jives me, 'But, honey, I got a man in there now.' 'I ain't keerin' 'bout no other man. Run dat man off. Or give me my five dollars. Do somepin' fas' 'cause I ain't bodder wid you much longer.' She slam

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de do' in my face. Dat settle it wid me. I holler back at her, say, 'Gal, I'm gonna meet up wid you some day. Go on yo' ways, but I'll git you. If you outrun me, you gonna have to buy a ticket long as you is tall.' So I goes on off.

"Well, one day I went pas' her house an' weren't nobody home. Her mamma was gone to meetin', an' dis gal was by herself. I waited for her at de corner an' met her when she come down de street. I stop her an' say, 'Hello, baby.' She say, 'Good mawnin'!' short off an' jes' a-flyin' by. ('Fo' she got my money I couldn't turn from her.\* ) Well, I goes on, but I watched her. She was makin' through de woods to anudder clearin', so I runs aroun' to head her off an' cuts me a nice switch, long as my leg an' big as my finger. Then I waits for her to come down de trail in de thickes', lonesomes' part o' de woods. Soon's she come 'long, I runs up behin' her easy so she wouldn't hear me an' den I say, 'Fool wid me, huh?' Come down on her wid my switch, *Whop!* 'Take my money, huh?' *Whop!* She was runnin' an' I was frailin' her. She was holl'in' an' cryin', 'Gonna tell my mamma, you dirty bastard. Oh, don' kill me, please don' kill me. Oh, Lawd have mercy! Oh, quit, darlin'! Oh, you black devil!' Man, dat gal was runnin' an' screamin' like a mule wid de high-life, an' I was comin' in behind her wid my switch. Lawd God, I whip dat ol' gal right down to de groun'. I whip de dress right off her back. I switch her till de switch frazzled to pieces. An' what I had lef' I threw at her.

"Well, I was done wid her, so I leave her there in de woods, cryin', an' come home. I was married, too, had a good wife, Lethe. Wasn' long till the gal's mamma come to de house, jes' a-carryin' on, 'Where's dat low-down man o' yo's, Lethe? Done beat ev'y scrap o' skin offa my daughter's back. Go'n' have de law on him, sho, sho. Go'n' have him put in de jail. He been flyin' mighty high, but I'm gonna clip his wings . . .' Cou'se Lethe, was my wife, wasn' go'n say nothin' 'gainst me, an' so she tell de ol' lady, 'I don' know, mam. I specs you might fin' him down in de fiel' plowin'.'

"So de ol' woman come on down in de fiel' where I'se plowin'. She come on down there an' stood on de odder side o' de dreen ditch

\* She was close after him.

Fom me an' holler at me, 'I'm comin' over dere an' be whip', too, you nigger devil, you. Whip de daughter, might's well whip de mamma.' I stood dere between de plow-handles, easy. I knowed that o' woman didn' want no whippin', an' I knew she wasn' go'n' come no closer to me. She scream at me again, 'What you doin' whip my po' daughter so she cain' ha'dly walk, you low-down black rascal? Who you think you are?'

"Well, mam, I had len' her some money an' when I ask her for it back, she wouldn' treat me right. I figgered if it wasn' comin' outa her purse, I had to take it outa her hide.'

"You some chief devil, ain' you? You been goin' wid my daughter, too, ain' you? You talk like a deacon, an' a chil' o' you's be born ev'y weekday an' two on Sundays. De Lawd's gonna strike his fire in yo' heart some day to git you rid o' that murderin' pride o' yo's. Hope you burnt to a frazzle by lightnin' 'fo' you ever lan' in hell, as you sho'ly will!!! . . . Lawd have mercy! dat ol' woman preach my fun'al dat day. Preach me dead an' raise me up an' preach me back dead in hell again. Yassuh! She was talkin' 'bout me. . . . Well, after she waste all her win' on me, she goes on off an' goes to de sheriff an' tried to have me 'rested. But the sheriff wasn' go'n' boddere me. He knowed I had been goin' wid de gal anyhow. So he tol' de ol' woman to go 'long.

"An' you know after dat happen, I couldn' get no woman 'roun' dere to take my money! I'd be at a meetin' an' I'd go up to a woman 'n' say, 'Gal, lemme give you a few nickels.' Dey'd laugh an' say, 'Nawsuh! Mister Boyd. Don' want none o' yo' money, thank you kin'ly. Feared you might beat de dress right off my back.' An' den we'd laugh, an' I'd jive wid her an' go on to de nex'."

And so on "to de nex'," even though he was really devoted to Lethe, tender with her and thoughtful so that she loved him as all his women have loved him. But there were too many of them, and one day, December 13, 1917, Walter Boyd (alias Huddie Ledbetter) was lodged in the New Boston, Texas, jail charged with murder and assault. He had started out through the river bottom one evening late

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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to a dance. Two of his friends were along and he was armed, presumably because the bottom was a dangerous place at night. Alex Griffin began to "jive" Will Stafford about the way his girl had been playing around with other men. Walter Boyd's name was drawn into the talk and Stafford drew a pistol. Walter Boyd shot Stafford through the middle of his forehead, and Alex Griffin ran off into the woods believing that Walter had tried to kill him, too. Lead Belly, alias Walter Boyd, realized he was in a bad spot.

Old Man Wess Ledbetter turned up right away with his pocket full of the money he had got by selling some of his hard-earned sixty-eight acres. Mahaffey and Keency, criminal lawyers, were retained. We can imagine the wild-eyed, restless Lead Belly we know, fuming behind the bars at the versatile, patient lawyers. The jury sent him up for thirty years.

In the meantime Lead Belly, alias Walter Boyd, had lain six long months in jail. The "king" in jail! bound down in all his pride, in all his strength! This was somehow wholly unjust and unendurable. Not that he hadn't killed the man—"shouldn' been messin' wid me"—but to be ordered about, to be kept away from women . . . He knew the appeal was hopeless. If he could once break jail, "wasn' no dog in the worl' could catch him, go so fast an' so far. Run now, man, fly!"

He did break jail, as is shown in a court record. He overpowered the jailer, took his arms, and fled—and was free for three days. Later he was recaptured and committed. On June 7, 1918, he was received at the Shaw State Prison Farm and put out to work in the fields. Neither his father nor his guitar playing could help him now. He had thirty years hanging over his head, thirty desperate, driving years.

"I hadn' been long at de Shaw farm till I run off, me with my buddy." (This was his third escape.) "I seen de niggers gettin' whipped—dey hadn' hit me a lick 'cause I was a good worker—but I didn' want to 'low 'em no chance at me. An' anyhow I didn' like de penitenshuh. I wasn' used to it an' didn' like it. Couldn' do widout

women 'tall. I been used to lots o' women, an' I couldn' stan' de penitenshuh.

"Fus' chance I got in de fiel' I slip behin' a brush pile an' got a good start 'fo' de boss noticed. He went pokin' in de brush pile, but I was gone, yassuh, I was gone some. I would pass women on de road an' I was crazy for one, but I hear de dogs comin' an' say, 'Hello, darlin',' an' fly on by. I was runnin' some. You know, when a man come to get his secon' win' look like he gonna die tryin' to get it, but when it come to him he gonna run all day an' never git tired. My buddy was beginnin' to run slow an' look like he about to give out, an' I say, 'Boy, you gonna make it?' He 'gin to cry an' say, 'I don' know, Walter.' I was comin' in my secon' win', too, an' it felt like I had a knife in my side; but I wasn' gonna let on. My breath was comin' sho't an' fas', but I was goin'. Wasn' long till my buddy fell out, an' I went on away an' lef' him. They got him dat day an' took him back. But I don' b'lieve they would ever got me, if hadn' some hard luck come. I run clean away f'om de dogs. Dat evenin' I laid down in de rushes by a pon' of water to get some res'. Well, a white man come along an' saw me dere asleep an' went to the sheriff. Nex' thing I knowed de dog boy was shakin' me an' sayin', 'Come on, Walter, let's go back to de camp.'

"I tell him, 'Keep those dogs offa me.' De dogs was all aroun' an' wantin' to bite me, but he hit one wid a stick an' knock him back; den he say, 'Come on, Walter, le's go.' Well, I didn' want to go an' I tol' him, 'Naw, nigger, I ain' goin' back to dat place no mo? De white man threw his pistol down on me an' say, 'Get up there an' walk, you damn nigger.' I gets up, but I walk on away from dem. Didn' pay no 'tention to de gun. Didn' care. He holler, 'Come on back here, nigger, or I'll shoot your black heart out. I'll shoot!' But I didn' pay him no min'. I wasn' goin' back. I walked on out in de lake, right up to my neck, an' tried to drown myself. Look like I could feel de water cuttin' off my win' like stran's o' bob-wire 'cross my chest higher an' higher to my neck.

"But they wasn' gonna let me drown. Dey pull me out an' turn me upside down an' squeeze de lake outa me. Look like I swallowed

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de whole lake, water was runnin' outa ev'y hole. I could feel de life comin' back slow, an' de dog boy say, 'Walter, how you feel?' I tried to say somepin', but I couldn' make no soun'. I lay dere right still an' feel de life comin' back all over. De dog boy say ag'in, 'Walter, can you go now?' I tried to tell him I wasn' ready to go yet, but look like I couldn' say no word, jes' could make a soun' wid my throat, *Krlrug*. When I feel able, I got up an' walk wid 'em. (I'm de kinda man gonna go when he can an' mos' gen'ly feel able to go.) Dey put me in a wagon an' take me back to camp.

"Cap'n Francis was a good cap'n. Didn' sen' me out to work no mo' for a week. One day he come in de picket an' call me to de bars. He set down an' talk to me kin'. 'Now, listen, ol' nigger, you got to get runnin' offa your mind. Won't do you no good. You'll get killed, or you'll get caught. Now, I want you to stay with me an' work, an' you'll be all right. Nobody's gonna bother you or hurt you at all. You haven't got but thirty years, and that ain't gonna be nothin' for you to make. Now, listen, I'm gonna send you out tomorrow, and I'm gonna watch you; and I want to see you make good. Some day you can be one of the best workers in de penitenshuh.' I tol' him, 'Yassuh.'

"Nex' day I went out in de fiel', an' from den on I was a rollin' sonofabitch. Dat's where I learned to work—down on de Shaw farm. Look like de Texas penitenshuh niggers got all de res' ob 'em beat for workin'. Now I been to Lou's'ana, an' Arkansas, Georgia, and Alabama, an' all dem odder states, an' I seen all them penitenshuhs an' looked how dey conducted their affairs in all ob 'em; but in Texas dey got 'em all beat for workin'. An' in Texas I was a number one roller, jus' flyin' all day long. I can make a ax talk, an' I can handle a hoe jus' like I can handle a guitar.

"Dey had me in number one hoe squad on de lead row. Sometimes one o' dem niggers would come up an' try to rush me. I'd look at de boss an' he'd say, 'Take 'em away, ol' Walter.\* Man, then I'd fly on dat row, get to de en', whirl' aroun', an' be gone ag'in. Man, I'd leave dem niggers so far behin' till I couldn' hardly see 'em."

\* The whole gang has to keep fairly well up with the fastest worker of the group.

"Den de boss would holler, 'Let 'em down, ol' Walter.' An' I'd slack down till they got nearly up to me, an' then—'Take 'em away, ol' nigger.' I'd say, 'Yow, I'm gone.' Then I'd walk off an' leave 'em ag'in. Man, I'd have 'em pantin' all day long, never would let 'em down. Niggers be fallin' out all over de fiel', an' I'd be feelin' jes' right. Den dey'd be sorry for tryin' to tes' me, an' they'd say, 'Please, Walter, you gonna kill us all. Please, Walter, give us a rest. We won' do it no mo'.' I'd tell 'em, 'I'm gonna learn you so good you won' do it no second time. You hadn' oughta been so big de fus' time.' Den I'd fly on away, holl'in' an' singin', an' carry 'em dat way till sun-down.

"One time, when I was in de number one gang, boss ask me somepin', an' I wouldn' say nothin' to him. I had my mouth shut to keep my wind in. I was 'bout half sick dat day, an' I had to keep f'om talkin' to go at all. Well, when I didn' say nothin', he got mad an' when de cap'n come he tol' him to whip me. Cap'n Francis was a good man, an' he like me 'cause I'se de bes' worker he got on his farm an' he didn' want to whip me. He ask de boss what I'd done. 'I don't see nothin' wrong with him,' he say. 'Aw, looks like he's got something against me. He's beginning to think he's boss around here, an' it's about time he got a little taste of that leather. He doesn't know what it is. Teach the black bastard some manners.'

"Well, Cap'n Francis didn' want to whip me, but he had to back up his boss, so he get down from his horse an' 'gin to untie the leather from his saddle. The niggers had tol' me, say, 'Walter, if they try to whip you, don' put down yo' hoe.' We mens in de number one gang, what was de bes' workers on de farm an' was always rollin', wasn' goin' 'low no number one man to get whip. So Cap'n Francis, he call me, 'Come here, Walter.' I say, 'Yow, cap'n,' an' run to him. He say 'What's de matter with you, you black bastard?' I tell him, 'Not a thing, cap'n.' 'What you been doin', you black sonofabitch?' (Cap'n Francis was a cussing among de numbers an' a powerful mean-lookin' man, little an' weasly like.) 'I ain' been doin' a thing, suh.' 'Put down dat hoe, you kinky-haired devil, you!' I didn' say nothin', but I didn' put down de hoe. I watch him. 'Put down that hoe, you black-hearted

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bastard!' I stood dere an' held my hoe an' didn't tell him nothin'. When he see I wasn't gonna put it down an' take my whippin', he call de niggers to come an' catch me an' throw me down. They come runnin' an' dodgin' aroun' me, but ev'y time one would try to come in near I'd draw back my hoe like I'se gonna cut his head off, an' he'd run away holl'in', 'Cap'n, Walter's tryin' to cut me.' Man, that cap'n was cussin' us f'm Generous to Revolution. He'd holler at de niggers to grab me, an' they'd put on like they tryin', but they didn't. Then he'd holler at me again. By that time the bosses had rode up an' had throwed down their shotguns an' rifles on me. They told de cap'n, 'I'll shoot him, if you say so. I'll shoot him, if you gimme the word.' I didn't say nothin' an' I didn't throw down my hoe, but I watch the cap'n, 'cause I knew he had de 'sponsibility an' they wasn't gonna shoot me if he didn't tell 'em to. I didn't pay them bosses no min', but if he tell 'em to shoot I was gonna get rid of dat hoe an' hit the ground.

"Well, I reckon dat was my lucky day. De good Lawd mus' 'a' been wid me. I've seen lotsa men shot down in de penitenshuh for less, but dey didn't kill me. I reckon it was 'cause I was such a good worker. De cap'n didn't want to lose me. De cap'n say, 'God damn you, git on away, you nigger sonofabitch!' I say, 'Yow, cap'n, I'm gone.' Man, then I was rollin' some. Blowin' my horn, way down de line an' rarin' to go. My hoe move so fas' I couldn't follow it myse'f, an' them niggers cryin' for mercy an' fallin' out all day long."

He had run away from the chain gang under the disturbing gaze of a Winchester. He had overpowered his white jailer and broken out of jail. He had run away from the Shaw penal farm before his first week there was out and, rather than be brought back, had tried to commit suicide by drowning. But when Captain Francis requested the Board of Pardons to give him a clear record, he turned his energy to the business of "makin' it," or surviving, in the Texas penitentiary. He became the best worker on the farm and the best "white man's nigger" in the whole system. His cunning, his body, his strength, his will, fitted him well to survive; and, under the hot sun, through the long driving days, in the coarse routine of the prison system, Lead Belly flourished.

## Negro Folk Songs

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In 1920 he was transferred to the Central State Farm at Sugar Land, near Houston, under the managership of Captain Flanagan—transferred against his will. Since he had learned to fit so well into the balance of tempers at the Shaw Farm he was afraid to be moved. Afterwards he was glad of it. He found Captain Flanagan a “sporty fellow” who never whipped or rebuked unless it was necessary, had no flare-ups of temper and irritation, and loved music. Lead Belly was made a sort of trusty—that is, he was allowed to go by himself on Sundays to the other camps on the farm and entertain the men; but, for the week days, he begged the captain to keep him in the “line.”\* Lead Belly didn’t want to be a trusty. He had seen a Negro trusty, whose duty it was to keep order in the cell-room, given life for beating a line-man to death. During the week, therefore, Lead Belly stayed in the field, where he knew he could hold his own; on Sundays he was free to wander about in the sunshine and do as he pleased.

One day old man Wess Ledbetter turned up at Captain Flanagan’s office with a pocketful of new greenbacks. He had sold ten or fifteen acres of land and had come, he said, to get his boy out of the pen. Across the table at Captain Flanagan he shoved his fat roll of bills and said: “I ain’ keerin’ how much it will cos’; all I wants is to git my boy out of trouble. He my only darlin’ chil’, an’ I’m gittin’ ol’; an’ I needs him to he’p on my farm. Please, suh, take as much o’ my money as you wants an’ turn my boy loose.” Old man Wess couldn’t understand why Captain Flanagan, who was such a fine man, wouldn’t take his money and let his boy go home. He shook his head as he told his son good-by: “They mus’ think you’s a mighty bad boy an’ needs lotsa punishment, Huddie. Don’ reckon I’m gonna see you again, boy. I’m gittin’ mighty ol’, an’ I know I ain’ got long to live.” Old man Wess Ledbetter went back to Mooringsport. Four months later he was dead.

The months of Lead Belly’s young manhood rolled away, and he hollered and sang and held the lead row.

“Some in de buildin’, some on de farm,  
Some in de graveyard, an’ some goin’ home,”

\* Non-trusties; guarded field workers.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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he wailed as he watched the men come and go. He saw new men die on their feet because they were too frightened to take their work easy the first week or so—even when the guards ordered them to slow down. Whenever he could, he helped the men who couldn't "roll." \* He learned to be tireless and easy and smooth so that he could keep up the swiftest pace all day long. "Buck-jumping," that is, covering up the grass on the cotton rows instead of rooting each clump up separately, became a fine art with him. One day, when the assistant captain didn't like the way the work was going and came across the field whipping the men, man by man, gang by gang, Lead Belly dodged around under the belly of the captain's horse until the fellow gave up trying to get at him with his bridle reins. He smirked and smiled and played his guitar and got on very well. Every Sunday, when women would come out to the farms, he was scurrying around to see if he could get one off by herself. At last, after *three years*, he contrived it. Mary was her name, Mary from Houston.

Then the word came that Pat Neff, the new governor, was coming to visit all the penitentiary camps. Lead Belly, sure that he would be called to play and dance for the governor, laid his plans. "De governor come," said Lead Belly, "an' he had Mrs. Neff and a whole car of women-folks wid him." That night after supper Lead Belly was called to the picket and escorted to the captain's back porch. There sat Governor Pat M. Neff, "a big, fine-lookin' man. An' dat man sho was crazy 'bout my singin' an' dancin'. Ev'y time I'd sing a new song or cut a few steps he'd roll me a bran-new silver dollar 'cross the flo'.<sup>1</sup> Las' song I sung was a song I had made up askin' him to turn me loose, let me go home to Mary. (I called her my wife, if she wasn't my wife.) He tol' me when I was through, say, 'Walter, I'm gonna give you a pardon, but I ain' gonna give it to you now. I'm gonna keep you down here to play for me when I come, but when I go out of office I'm gonna turn you loose if it's de las' thing in de worl' I ever do.'<sup>2</sup>

"Sho 'nough I didn't hear no mo' fom him fuh nearly a year. Dey all tol' me, say, 'Dat man ain' gonna tu'n you loose, ol' Walter. He

\* Work fast.

## Negro Folk Songs

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wouldn' tu'n his own mammy loose.' \* But I didn' lose faith. Nawsuh. An' you know, day after Governor Pat Neff went out of office, Cap'n Flanagan call me an' tol' me to go home."

Lead Belly headed straight for Houston and Mary.

When he opened Mary's door, he had one hundred and fifteen dollars † in his pocket, was stronger and more confident of himself than he had ever been before. His energy and his music, which had got him into trouble, had won him his freedom. With intelligence and cunning and courage he had sung his way out of a thirty-year sentence, after only six and a half years in the penitentiary. He was forty years old and proud of himself.

He tired of Mary and came back to Mooringsport and got a job with the Gulf Refining Company, driving a truck at fifty dollars a month. The big trucks with their fifty-foot loads of pipe gave him a sense of power, and he had found an entirely satisfactory substitute for Lethe. Era was her name, and she was very much in love with him. She kept house for Lead Belly and his mother, Sallie, who had come in from the farm to live with them. Sallie was getting old, and Lead Belly was devoted to her. No amount of money or whisky could lure him away from home to a dance, if Sallie felt low in her mind or if she wanted anything. On Saturday nights, when Sallie felt strong, Era would go with him to the dance hall just across the lake at Oil City where the crowd gathered to hear the man who had sung himself out of the Texas Penitentiary.

One night, "I was playin' 'Mister Tom Hughes's Town.' You know that's a piece where a man has got to keep his min' concentrated, an' I wasn' watchin' things like I mostly did. Fust thing I know a man had stuck his knife in my neck an' was pullin' it aroun' my throat jes' tryin' to cut my head off. 'Nother fellow runned up an' pulled his pistol, tryin' to shoot me. I didn' pay no 'tention to him, but I grabbed that knife with bofe han's an' wrench it outa my neck while Era grab de pistol an' fight wid de odder man. Era was a reg'lar wil' cat when

\* He pardoned only five convicts during a term of four years as governor.

† Made in prison, dancing, singing, etc.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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somebody git on her blin' side, an' she had dat pistol away f'om dat man 'fo' he know what happen. She hand it to me, an' I chase de man had stab me. He run out in de lake up to his neck in water so I let him go an' come back after de odder fellow. I jump on him an', man, I had him beat mos' to death 'fo' I let him go—playin' a tune on his head wid dat pistol. When de doctor come to look at him, he tol' his frien's wa'n't no use tryin' to sew him up, might as well cut de man's head off 'cause dey wasn' much lef' of it anyhow. De man didn' die, but it took him two months to git well an' when he did, he never did have much sense. Well, I walk on down to de police station, bleedin' like a stuck hawg, an' give in de pistol. I tol' 'em what had happen', an' dey tol' me to go on home an' not come back to play in Oil City no mo', 'cause those folks might try to do me somepin'. An' I sho didn'. I stayed away f'om dat place."

So Lead Belly explained the terrible, deep scar that runs around his neck like a collar. These years around Mooringsport were violent and bloody. He had a car of his own, and he rambled and drank and "was terrible wid de womens." He shot a Negro man five times, and the Negro died. He avoided prosecution on the plea of self-defense. As Era got old to him, he left her at home when he went out hunting for his audience. With her along, he had to push away the women.

Without the protection of some powerful white man, no Negro could stay out of jail long in northwestern Louisiana and go the pace that Lead Belly went during the years he lived in Mooringsport. Trouble came down on him soon enough.

"I was comin' home f'om wuck one day wid my dinner bucket in my han' when a gang o' niggers come runnin' up: 'Say, Ledbetter, give us some o' yo' whisky.' I turn aroun' an' tell 'em, 'Goddamn it, haven' you heard me say I didn' have no whisky—nothin' but mule?' Go on away, don' bodder me now. I'm tired an' don' feel like no foolishness.' An' yit unstill de kep' worr'in' me about de whisky. They kep' foolin' wid me. I didn' pay 'em no min' till one ob 'em say, 'You a goddamn lyin' nigger, you got some whisky.'

"Wasn' nothin' for me to do but to grab him. I didn' 'low him time to say no mo'. I grab him by his collar an' pull him up to me an' begin

## Negro Folk Songs

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to put my knife to him, *Whop! Whop! Whop!* ‘Goddamn you black bastard, you’ll fool wid me, will you? Goddamn, I’ll fix you, goddamn, you won’ fool wid me no mo’!’ An’ I kep’ whoppin’ my knife in him, an’ him screamin’, ‘Get him off, get him off! He’s killin’ me!’—jus’ bawlin’ fo’ help. When ’nother nigger come up I let de one I had go—he was glad to run—an’ I grab me my nex’ an’ commence to cut him. Lawd God, I was cuttin’ niggers fas’ de nex’ while! Putty soon they was six ob ’em runnin’ down de street wid blood jus’ gushin’ out.

“De po’lice ran up an’ caught me by de arm and got me down to de calaboose. Nex’ day Sheriff Tom Hughes carried me down to de Shreveport jail an’ kep’ me there till I come to be tried.”

“When a man’s in trouble ev’body turns him down, nobody will go his bail, his friends and relations turn their backs on him and won’ even come to see him.” That was the way Huddie found things, lying up in the Shreveport jail. “My people lived all over dat country, an’ not one ob ’em come to see me. I don’ blame ’em. They were scared to come ’roun’ de jail house; they was scared they would git in trouble. I used to be de same way ’fo’ I got in trouble—nobody couldn’ git me down to de jail house. But when I got to know how bad de jail was on a man, I be down to see all my frien’s git in trouble. . . . An’ yet unstil I git back to Shrevepo’t wid my new car an’ my lots of money, don’ you think I’m gonna go ’roun’ to see my relations or give ’em a ride in my car! Man, I’m jus’ gonna fly on by an’ leave ’em flat-footed.” Era was the only one who stuck by him, and she didn’t have the money to hire a lawyer.

Lead Belly was sent to Angola, the Louisiana State Prison farm, for ten years for assault with intent to murder, in 1930, just five years after leaving the penitentiary in Texas. He was whipped twice for impudence, but on the whole had as easy a time as a man can have at Angola. His “twelve strings” made him camp entertainer. When white visitors came, Lead Belly took the edge off their impression with “Irene.” An ambitious and influential Italian bartender, a trusty with a life sentence from New Orleans, organized a jazz orchestra of Ne-

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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groes; he was sometimes allowed to take this group to Baton Rouge, where the boys played for Rotarian conventions and the like, and, when we came to Angola with our recording machine, he was in fine fettle. In the introduction to his petition for a pardon, addressed to Governor O. K. Allen, he says:

"The fust day of July the good, cool, kind boss, better known as Mister John A. Lomax, and his son, better known as Mister Alan Lomax, they come down on Angola—it was rainin' one Sunday. An' he tol' me, says, 'This song that you compose about Governor O. K. Allen,' says, 'if you'll sing it through my mikeaphone, I'll take it to Governor O. K. Allen for you.' I thanked him, says, 'Boss, if you take it to Governor O. K. Allen, I shore believe he gonna turn me loose.' An', sho nuff, de boss—I sung this song to him an' he taken it to Baton Rouge an' one month from that day Governor O. K. Allen told me to go home.

"When Boss lef' an' wen' to Baton Rouge, it was de fust day of July. On de fust day of Augus', ol' Cap'n Reaux call me, 'Come here, ol' niggah.' 'Yassuh, cap'n,' an' I run up to where he's settin' on de step. 'Ol' niggah, can you git packed by tomorrow mawnin'?' 'Yassuh, cap'n!?' 'We can't feed you down here any more, so I'm gonna send you home. Now, rack away from me, ol' niggah! git!' 'Thank you, cap'n, thank you, suh! Thank you, Jesus, thank you! Lawd have mercy!!'

"I went runnin' an' clappin' my han's an' shoutin', 'Hallelu! Thank you, Boss Lomax, thank you, thank you!' I run down to Mrs. Cap'n Reaux's house an' into de front yard an' jus' kep' on jumpin' an' shoutin'. She run out an' say, 'What's the matter with you, Lead Belly? You gone crazy?'

"They gonna sen' me home, Miss Reaux, bless Jesus!"

"I jump up an' down an' clap my han's an' cry an' laugh an' shout dat way all over de farm. Nex' mawnin' I had my money an' my clo'es an' my guitar ready to go. Cap'n Reaux call me, say, 'All right, ol' niggah, git yo' guitar an' play 'em one mo' piece 'fo' you go home. Play 'em "Irene," ol' niggah.' An' I sit down—all them niggers lookin' at me an' thinkin' how lucky I was to be goin' home—an' I play 'em

## Negro Folk Songs

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"Irene." What I mean I was singin' that mawnin'. Them niggers was lookin' an' talkin', 'Look at Lead Belly, would you! Goddamn, he musta been born wid a toby.'\*

"Then I went off runnin' an' holl'in', 'Good-by, Cap'n Reaux, good-by, penitenshuh. Good-by, Angola.' I run down de road an' ev'y once in a while I'd jump clean off de groun' an' holler, 'Lawd Godamighty!'

"I goes on down to de river † an' cross de ferry. Dat night I stayed in de little town on the other side an' played for de niggers, an' a li'l gal tol' me to come to her house dat night 'bout twelve an' knock on her window. When de time come, I went an' knocked. She was sho sweet an' jus' a li'l bitty thing 'bout sixteen years ol'. 'Fo' day nex' mawnin', she took me down to de track an' showed me where I could catch de freight for Shrevepo't. It come along at sunup an' I got in de box-car 'mongst a lotta odder niggers an' rode all day. Nawsuh! I didn' sleep—didn' need no sleep—thinkin' 'bout Era an' Shrevepo't. It was five in de afternoon when de train got there, an' I went and called Era, an' she didn' have no way to come down. That made me think somepin's funny so I wen' on up to Mornin'spo't after dark when nobody wouldn' know no better, an' wen' to see Era. She was a nice, pretty woman an' treated me fine. When I was in trouble, she tried to he'p me out. She had wrote me three years an' six mon's while I was in de pen an' then hadn' written no mo'. I knowed she was livin' wid another man—big fat-mouf nigger used to drive a truck would come by our house in Mornin'spo't an' give her a li'l change ev'y now and then—a few nickels;—but I didn' min' so long as she'd tell me 'bout it when I ask her.

"Well, dat evenin' after dark I goes out to my house at Mornin'spo't an' foun' Era. She kiss me an' say hello, an' we sit an' talk. Den I went back in de back room an' there was this nigger man layin' up in my bed. I say, 'Howdy, how you been?' An' he say, 'I been gittin' by. How you, Mister Ledbetter.' 'I been fine,' I say. Well, we talk awhile, den I say, 'Well I better be runnin' along, now. It's been nice to see you folks again after so long a time.' 'Don' hurry,'

\* Charm, amulet.

† The Mississippi.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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they tell me. 'Cancha stay awhile an' set wid us?' 'No, I got to be movin'. It's gittin' late. Well, good-by.' An' I shake his hand good-by. He say, 'Well, I wish you could set wid us while longer this time, but come out again soon an' see us. We be glad to have you. We're just home folks to you. Come have supper wid us some time.' 'I sholy will. Well, good night.' Era goes out on de front porch wid me an' I kisses her good-by. She tol' me dat she'd slip off an' leave him, but I tol' her she better not. I didn't want no trouble wid him, an' besides I wasn't keerin' nothin' 'bout Era no mo'. I didn't min' her sellin' my clo'es while I was in de pen, an' not writin' me while her an' dat nigger was livin' in my house, an' I didn't min' her usin' my furniture while I was gone; but I couldn't stan' her not comin' when I call for her. I had gone 'roun' see Marthy anyhow, an' she had done me so fine I didn't want Era no mo', anyhow.

"Well, I goes on back to Marthy's house, an' nex' thing I hear 'bout Era was Sat'dy mawnin'. She was in jail. I goes on down to see her, an' there she was, sho 'nough, right there wid dat nigger behin' de bars. I didn't pay no 'tention to him, says, 'Era, what they got you in here for?' I knew what it was, but I was jus' testin' her.

"She tell me, say, 'They 'cuses me of sellin' whisky.'

"I gets mad den. 'You know you been sellin' whisky! What you talkin' 'bout 'cisin'? Ain't I write you f'om de pen to stop selling whisky or you get in trouble? Then when you git de liquor an' yo' husban' comes back from the penitenshuh you ain't even polite enough to offer him a drink!'

"I gi'n her de few nickels I had, an' den I ask if I could go git my refrigerator I had bought 'fo' I went to de pen. You oughta seen dat woman. Lawd, she got mad, tried to git through de bars to me. 'What you doin' comin' down here talkin' 'bout yo' refrigerator? It's mine an' in my house, an' I'll have you 'rested if you go out dere an' try to get it. Comin' down here an' worr'in' a po' woman in dis trouble. . . .'

"Well, I tol' her it was all right 'bout de refrigerator, an' yet unstil it *was* mine, had bought it bran-new 'fo' I went to de pen. I was gonna let her have all my other things, but Marthy *did* want dat refrigerator.

## Negro Folk Songs

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I ain' seen Era no mo' since, an' I ain' keer to see her no mo'. Dey got her down to de frederick \* pen in New Orleans, now, wid six months hangin' over her head.

"Well, I goes on to Marthy—had been goin' wid her on the q.t. before I went to the penitentiary—an' she sho was fine to me. She took me in when I didn' have no frien's an' was walkin' the streets, ragged, wid nothin' to eat. I'se had all kinds o' women an' de bes' kin' to git is one what loves you an' you can trus'. That's why I don' keer nothin' 'bout no other woman but Marthy. But soon I had to leave her, for de Boss wrote me to come to Marshall, Texas."

\* Federal.

## FINDING LEAD BELLY

"Boss, here I is."

I looked up from my newspaper as I sat in a hotel lobby in Marshall, Texas, on Sunday September 16, 1934, to see a Negro man standing timidly by my chair. He had touched my shoulder to draw my attention as he stood there, his face ashen with uncertainty and fear.

In his right hand he held a battered twelve-string guitar, in his left a brown-paper sugar bag. He wore no coat; only an old hat, a blue shirt, a patched pair of overalls and rusty, yellow shoes—gifts from the Louisiana penitentiary.\*

"Why, hello, Lead Belly! What are you doing here?"

"I'se come to be your man, boss: to drive yo' car and wait on you. I writes you fo' letters. I sent 'em to Austin. Yo' telegram is in dis paper sack."

"Come on upstairs to my room," I answered, "and we'll talk about it."

He followed, telling me as we climbed the stairs how well I was looking and how glad he was to see me. When we reached the room he stood before me, ill at ease and doubtful. I insisted that he sit down. I shall always remember how he looked as he rested on the very edge of his chair, nervous, uneasy, uncertain of the issue, his paper bag making a grating noise on the side of his chair as his hand trembled, though his well knit, lithe body showed that he possessed tremendous physical power.

"Lead Belly," I began, "I do need a driver and some one to help

\* He afterwards told me: "Captain Reaux gimme ten dollars when I lef' de pen. I spent it de fus' night."

me run my recording machine. As you know, Alan is sick and unable to travel with me. First, I'd like to know if you are carrying a gun."

Lead Belly looked at his sugar sack and replied:

"No, suh, boss, but I'se got a knife."

"Let me see it."

He handed me his knife, which I opened and balanced on my hand. It had a long, narrow blade, sharpened to a razor edge.

"Lead Belly," I said, "down in Austin I have a home and a lovely lady for my wife; also a very dear daughter, Bess Brown. I hope to live a long while for their sakes. If you sometime—when we are driving along a lonely road—decide that you are going to take my money and car, you need not stick this knife into me. Just tell me and I'll hand you my money, get out of the car, and let you drive on."

"Boss," he said, as if deeply moved, "boss, I don't think you oughta talk dat way to me. Boss, dis is de way I feels about you: Ef you got in a fight wid a man an' he start to shoot you, I'd jump in between an' ketch de bullet myself an' not let it tech you. Boss, please, suh, lemme go wid you; I'll keep yo' car clean an' drive jes' like you tell me. I'll wait on you day an' night. An', boss, you'll never have to tie yo' shoes again ef you'll lemme do it."

I never saw Lead Belly shed a tear, though then he apparently came near to breaking down. He moved me, too, for I realized that probably no one in the world, except his woman, felt the slightest interest in him, that he might soon be back in the penitentiary for some crime against his own people. But for the moment I did not let him know that I had yielded. I asked him about his experience in handling and repairing automobiles and his knowledge of machinery. He had worked in a garage and had owned two cars.

In a little while I told him that I would try him out. He clapped his hands over and over again, looked at my shoes to see if they were shined, grabbed a brush and began to hunt dust spots on my clothes. Thirty minutes afterward, with Lead Belly at the wheel, we were on our way, headed for the Negro prison camps of the State of Arkansas. Lead Belly's Odyssey had begun. "I wants to see New Yawk."

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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About a year before this meeting, my young son Alan and I had first seen Lead Belly as a trusty in Camp A of the Angola State Prison Farm, the largest unit of the Louisiana penitentiary, located on the Mississippi River eighty miles north of Baton Rouge. After three days spent in recording folk tunes from among the two thousand Negro men and women at the prison camps of this twenty-five thousand acre cane and corn farm, we went on our way.

Before we left, Lead Belly, whose singing and guitar playing had been outstanding among many excellent folk singers we found there, had earnestly begged us to go to General Manager Hymes in the State Capitol at Baton Rouge and ask that he be paroled to us, pleading that he in return would work for us the rest of his life.

"I'se subject to a parole, boss, an' I knows de Governor will be glad to turn me over to you if you will ask him. I ain't a bad nigger. Jes' got into trouble f'om drinkin' too much co'n whisky and gin, an' de mens don't like me much because de womens like me an' my guitar pickin'. I'll drive yo' car, cook yo' meals, wash yo' clo'es, an' be yo' man as long as I live.

"I'se de best nigger in de world; I'se de best car driver in de world; I'se de best cook in de world; I'se de best bed-maker in de world." (At that time Alan and I camped out of doors and did our own cooking.) "I'se de best guitar picker in de world! Start my ol' twelve-string box to twangin' in any town in dese Nunitied States an' de people'll come a-runnin'. I'll make you a lot of money. You needn't give me none, 'cept a few nickels to send my woman."

After each song he sang for us, when Captain Reaux was not about, he repeated these claims with variations. He declared that he was being punished through no fault of his own; he had to shoot to save his own life.

"I'se a hard-wuckin' nigger, too," he went on; "I always takes de lead row in de field, an' when us niggers chops a log dey gives me de butt cut, and then I gets through before dey do."

He was so earnestly persistent that I asked him finally if he had ever before been in trouble. "No, boss, I ain't ever been in jail befo',"

## Negro Folk Songs

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he declared; "an' I ain't ever been punished for bad conduct in dis penitenshuh. In de free world I'se always been a peaceabul nigger, not bodderin' nobody lessen dey bodder me. I ain' never done nothin' wrong in my life. I ain' never been punished on dis farm like dese other niggers."

But Lead Belly had forgotten, despite his declaration, "I am de best nigger in the world." The records that I found in Baton Rouge the next day showed that he was not subject to parole. Often he had been in trouble with the law. Once he had been convicted for murder in Texas and given a thirty-year sentence; also he had been whipped twice in Angola for misconduct. Sorrowfully I wrote these facts to Lead Belly. Back came a prompt reply again begging me to get him out of prison. He did not discuss the damaging evidence I had found. I sent no reply. But I couldn't take him with me. The picture kept coming to my mind of Alan and myself asleep by the roadside in the swamps of Louisiana and Mississippi with this particular black man on his cot near by, and the prospect did not look attractive.

A year later Alan and I again saw Lead Belly. We had gone back to Angola to have him sing for us a second time, bringing with us a new machine that we thought would produce better records of his voice and guitar.

Then, here again was Lead Belly, now wearing convict stripes because of some misconduct. But he was ready to sing in his strong, resonant voice; ready to play marvelously his old twelve-string guitar, interspersing between songs and in the midst of songs, "Please, suh, help me git out." All that Sunday he sang for us in the rain—a pitiful-looking figure in bedraggled, ragged stripes—while the drizzle formed in drops and ran down his face. Again at every pause he was urging us to help him win his freedom. Late in the afternoon he sang a petition—crude verse of his own composition—to Governor O. K. Allen to pardon him, telling us that he had once sung a similar song to Governor Pat Neff of Texas which had won his freedom from a thirty-year murder sentence. The power of his singing, his earnestly repeated appeals, his plight, his urging, "Boss, please, suh, help me

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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git outa dis place—I jes' nachully don' like it," finally moved me to tell him:

"Lead Belly, sing that pardon song again. We'll make a record of it. Then on the other side of the disc we'll record your favorite song—one that you select—and tonight Alan and I will drive back to Baton Rouge. Tomorrow I'll call on Governor Allen and, if possible, play him the entire record." He dropped his faithful, adhesive-taped, green, old guitar on the ground, clapped his hands joyfully, jumped up and down, and exclaimed:

"Thank you, boss, thank you, thank you! I knows, ef you do, de Governor's gwine to pardon me; when he hears dem songs he'll set me free. I'se gwine to play 'Irene' for the other side, an' I knows dat'll fix him. Thank you, boss, thank you! Jesus gwine to bless you for dis."

It was two o'clock next morning before Alan and I reached Baton Rouge. When I went to Governor Allen's office in the Louisiana Capitol I found the Legislature in session and Senator Huey Long closeted with the Governor. I met his secretary, who took the aluminum record and promised to play it for his chief. On August 1st, thirty days afterward, Lead Belly was across the Mississippi River and headed for Shreveport. In a paper bag he carried a carefully folded document. Governor Allen's pardon had come.\*

Then, a little more than a month later, came our meeting in Marshall, Texas.

\* General Manager Hymes has since written to me that Lead Belly's pardon was due to his "good time."

## TRAVELING WITH LEAD BELLY

AFTER I had fully decided to allow Lead Belly to come along as my driver and assistant-in-general, I asked him when he was ready to start. "I'se ready now, boss," he answered as he picked up his brown sugar bag and battered guitar.

"Well," I said, "first tell me what became of the farm near Marshall where you grew up, which now should be yours"—Lead Belly was an only child—"since both your father and mother died while you were in the penitentiary. Have the taxes been paid on it?"

"Yas, suh, boss; at least my cousin who lives on it said he would pay de taxes." (On my first meeting with Lead Belly more than a year before he had told me that he owned a good farm in Texas.)

A lawyer in Marshall undertook the business of looking up the title, paying the taxes, and protecting Lead Belly in all his rights. I left with this lawyer for safekeeping Lead Belly's pardon papers. "If," said I to the lawyer, with Lead Belly sitting by, "if I should fail to turn up some day, you can testify that you last saw me leave your office with this man." If Lead Belly understood the implication, he made no sign, then nor afterwards.

Before we left Marshall I drove him to the home of a relative where Lead Belly's mother had died while her son was in the Louisiana penitentiary. This man declared that the farm had been sold and that Lead Belly himself had signed the transfer papers. Lead Belly strenuously denied the statement. As we drove away, he repeated many times with variations "That cousin of mine is a no-'count nigger. He was jivin' you. He knowed he was lyin'." Although at that time penniless, owning not even a coat or a good pair of shoes, never again did Lead Belly mention his thousand-dollar farm; never

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again did he inquire about the lawyer in Marshall who was to investigate his land title, and who holds the evidence that he belongs to the "free world."

Lead Belly took his place at the wheel and headed the car north on the road to our first stop, Little Rock, Arkansas, three hundred miles away. A queerly assorted couple sat on that front seat—a white man hunting folk songs, a Negro ex-convict yet wearing his scanty prison clothes. A unique situation and an unusual enterprise.

In the back of the car I carried a five-hundred-pound electric recording machine furnished by one of the great educational foundations. This machine cut permanent records of folk tunes, these records to be placed in the Music Division of the Library of Congress. At the time I was hunting especially for Negro work songs, still used by black gang labor. As I had happened to guess, music of this type was yet dammed up in Southern penitentiaries and therefore easy to get at. It was only necessary to visit the Governors of the states, who were always ready to help with their influence. First, then, I must see the Governor of Arkansas.

Fate had chosen for my companion a Negro man whose mother had been a half-breed Cherokee Indian, his father an industrious and respected farmer. He had been twice a State convict, a county jail-bird and jail-breaker, every charge against him having been for physical violence. He had killed two men of his own race. Others he had shot or carved with his knife. His own face was scarred with jagged lines from knife cuts. His last sentence had been for using his deadly knife. He still carried that knife. I was alone and unarmed. Finally, he was fond of drink. Later he told me, "I don' want no whisky, but I got to have my gin."

Since then I have often wondered what were his thoughts as he held the car steadily on the highway. I did not know then. I do not know now. Lead Belly "thought with the back of his head and talked with front of his head"—not showing his full mind. But I had no fear of him. Only once, as I shall tell hereafter, did I feel myself in peril. And then liquor was responsible. Other than to furnish, through travel and change, an outlet for his restless activity, thus possibly

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keeping him out of trouble, I had no plans for him. The worst of the depression was on, and he could find no job in Shreveport. His woman, Martha, was paid only four dollars a week as a laundry worker. I could at least clothe and feed him in return for his help and company. He was a hungry man when he found me.

During those first days of travel he proved himself a cheerful, interesting, and attentive traveling companion. I found my first experience with a "body servant" pleasant. Each morning he waked me and handed me a cup of hot coffee, made ready my bath, laid out my clothes, allowed no hotel porter to touch my shoes or valises, and, as we started our daily drive, opened for me the door of a freshly cleaned car. He proved himself a careful driver. As we rode along, with a little leading, he told me amazing stories of his life as a barrelhouse and street singer, of his experiences in the penitentiary, and of his conquests among women. Occasionally I would ask him to sing some of the songs I first heard from him in the Louisiana penitentiary.

At Little Rock came to Lead Belly a suit of clothes that had been hurried from my home in Austin. My son John, Jr., and a group of his friends gave him another suit ("It's bran-new!" shouted Lead Belly), an overcoat, a half-dozen shirts and ties, and plenty of underclothes. When I had added a pair of shoes and a shiny hat, a new Lead Belly emerged. His face was aglow with happiness. For the first time in nearly five years he could put off convict clothes. For exhibition purposes I had him put them away, though he always hated to wear them.

Forty miles southeast of Little Rock stand the headquarters of the Arkansas penitentiary system. Thither after three days of work in the Negro district of Little Rock traveled Lead Belly and I. We found quarters at the Negro convict farm unit, which was in charge of only one white superintendent. All the guarding of the two hundred inmates is done by long-term Negro convicts. The superintendent put me up in his home, while Lead Belly lodged and fed with these guards and trusties. Before we reached the farm I told Lead Belly that I would not mention, either to the guard or to the prisoners, his penitentiary record; but we had not been there an hour before all the

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Negro convicts knew his story. In fact the Superintendent first asked me about my "jailbird." Grapevine telegraph quickly flashed the news to the last black prisoner. Nor did I ever know when or how Lead Belly passed on his story, for the same thing happened at every penitentiary we visited together.

While in Little Rock I had found Lead Belly's playing and singing useful. Other singers hearing him became ambitious to show me what they could do. While the competition was on I sometimes found songs I wished to record. In the same way I discovered that musicians among the Negro convicts in this prison camp, through Lead Belly's singing, quickly understood what I was looking for.

Only at night, after the men had eaten supper, and on Sundays did we have a chance to meet larger groups of prisoners. Sunday afternoon came. I talked; Lead Belly played and sang some sample songs, I "namin' de songs," as he always afterwards wished me to do. We sat at a point in the run-around while the men were crowded inside as close as possible to us, peering out between the iron bars. So eager were they to hear and see Lead Belly that at times some stood on the shoulders of others. When the twanging of his guitar strings rang out, supporting his rich-booming voice, silence fell in the rows of cells suddenly and completely. The crap games ceased, the cooncan players dropped their cards, while from dim corners, where groups were mumbling prayers and songs and religious preachments, poured all the worshipers, including the black ministers. For the moment Lead Belly's "sinful songs" became more powerful than the "spirituals." When Lead Belly finally played the dramatic and tragic ballad "Ella Speed," and reached the climax of the story where Bill Martin, the "long and slender bartender," kills Ella, he stopped his song and chanted loudly: "Don't none o' you boys kill no womens. You might do around, an' you might kill a man. You might kill a man, but please don't kill no womens. When you kill a woman you is gone." As is well known, the anger of a wronged black man is often keener against the woman than against the despoiler of his home. Lead Belly thus dramatically reminded his woman-murder hearers, unhappily already suffering for their crimes, of the certainty of punishment for killing a woman.

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Near me I saw three or four listeners nod their heads in agreement and remorse as this advice rang in their ears. He often repeated this advice at other places, but he gave no other counsel.

When Lead Belly had finished, his hearers crowded around the microphone which stood in the long cell room, all eager to sing. Sometimes, in order to find a quiet place, we set up our machine in the prison hospital. At one penitentiary, where echoes interfered, we were offered the soundproof execution room, which contained as its sole piece of furniture the grim electric chair, the "hot seat," covered with a white sheet.

But that Sunday in the lowlands of the Arkansas River was happy and profitable. The men seemed as contented and carefree as a group of children. Their excitement over the strange machine merged into laughing delight as the singers listened to their voices coming back to them from the newly made records. One man, not knowing what was going on and brought in suddenly from the barn to sing before the microphone, crumpled and fell flat on his back in amazed terror on hearing his own voice from the machine, while his companions shouted with laughter. Lead Belly was busy and helpful, marshaling the singers, adjusting the gadgets of the recording machine over my protest, seemingly anxious to "show off" among his own color. I was content. I began to see how useful he might prove to be.

The next morning I was ready to start south. Lead Belly, up at four o'clock with the field hands, had the car groomed to a shiny brightness. As I told my host good-by and started to get in the car, Lead Belly lowered his voice and said: "Boss, you won't have to worry about no gas today. I tipped one ob de nigger guards, and he filled her plumb-full f'om de State ob Arkansas tank. Best quality gas, too."

Should I pay the Superintendent and get Lead Belly's kind host into serious trouble? I had seen a dangerous-looking, five-foot black strap—a "black Betty"—hanging by the door on the inside of the big prison dormitory. I pondered. I am still pondering, still in debt to the Commonwealth of Arkansas for one tank of "best quality" gasoline. Lead Belly responded to my lecture on public morals:

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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"Shucks! White folks always has plenty of everything. Dey won't miss a little gas."

At the large prison farm near Pine Bluff, Arkansas, where we stayed for four days, Lead Belly became restless and dissatisfied. Martha had not seen his new clothes, and he wanted to drive my car down Fannin Street in Shreveport. He enjoyed greatly two visits that we made to the women's convict camp, where a noisy how-de-do was made over him, and where we recorded two or three songs from the singing of a bunch of lively young Negro girls. But he often said: "I'm tired of lookin' at niggers in the penitenshuh. I wish we could go somewhere else." In such a mood he was neither companionable nor helpful. So, finishing the work there, I decided to take the back track to Shreveport, four hundred miles distant, that he might spend some time with Martha. At Shreveport he disappeared for two days; then he cheerfully drove me away on the long road to Alabama.

We drove first to Birmingham and then to Tuscaloosa, where we visited the University of Alabama. Here Lead Belly seemed to please his white hearers more than he had been able to do in Arkansas and in my home at Austin, Texas. Late one moonlight night as we drove through the pines from Tuscaloosa to Montgomery, I asked Lead Belly to let me take the wheel for a while. He was deeply offended. "You don't trust me no mo', and I wants to go home to Martha," he repeated again and again. Perhaps he was disappointed at his hat collections from the Tuscaloosa audiences. Perhaps he tired of the monotony of long automobile drives. At any rate this was his first voiced complaint against me. My explanation seemed to satisfy him then, but more serious trouble was just ahead.

Without doubt Lead Belly had not found it easy to adjust himself to his new-found freedom. At times he had shown the effect of his old enemy, strong drink. I tried to help him by persuading him to leave his guitar under my bed at night, so that he would be less attractive in the dives he visited. But he was by nature and training a night prowler: "A nachul rambler, boss, dat's what I am." He found a Martha every night except on the penitentiary farms where they were

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locked up. I reproved him mildly for delaying some of our morning starts, and once at Shreveport somewhat severely when, being trusted with the car keys, he took an all-night drive. But he was facile in excuses and I was indulgent and easy-going. So no grave rifts had yet occurred.

As Lead Belly handed me the car keys when we separated one Saturday night at the door of my hotel in Montgomery, Alabama, I said to him: "Tomorrow morning, get your breakfast and be at the car door by seven o'clock. I have arranged to be at Kilby Prison as soon as the gates are open, where a group of the men will sing for us. The warden has agreed to let us record all tomorrow [Sunday] inside the prison walls. As you know, we have been waiting all the week for this chance. Now that it has come, it is very important. Be sure to get here on time."

"Yas, suh; yas, suh; I'll be right here."

Seven o'clock came, the next morning. No Lead Belly. Eight o'clock. Still no Lead Belly. I waited until nine o'clock, and then drove to his boarding house. The Negro proprietress told me that my man had spent the night there, that at the moment he had gone "somewhere," to get a shave.

I worked as best I could alone through the day until eleven o'clock that night. The parts of the machine were heavy to lift, while the actual making of the records, where one operator must watch the machine and at the same time control the singers, was a nerve-racking, almost an impossible, job. I was tired, worn, and disturbed, too, at the conduct of Lead Belly. In my hotel box I found a sealed note from him, reading:

Boss, I come here this morning in plenty time. You was done gone and left me. That is all right. I telegram to Martha for money to come home. [Martha's salary was four dollars a week.] I aint got no money. I am hungry.

Your servan,

HUDDIE LEDBETTER.\*

\* Lead Belly spent a year and a half in Marshall College. His speaking idiom was acquired from his fellow convicts through twelve years in prison. His manner of speech underwent a marked change during our six months' association.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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An hour later the hotel clerk waked me and said that my boy was at the desk, asking for me. I dressed and went downstairs.

"What do you want?" I asked him.

"I'se hungry. I hasn't got a nickel, an' I ain' eat nothin' today."

"You didn't come after your money," I answered. "Don't I give you a dollar the first thing every morning?"

"But, boss, you wusn't here."

"What time did I tell you to come?"

"Seven o'clock."

"What time did you get here?"

"In plenty-a time."

"Well, I'm done with you. I'm tired of dealing with a person who will break his promise." On I went to tell of the several times in the past month when he had failed to meet me at the time agreed, of how impossible it would be for me to help him unless he would keep appointments, of how no business could be carried on anywhere unless men could trust each other. I silenced his frequent attempts to interrupt me. Finally I concluded my exordium on business ethics, partly through weariness, partly through pity.

But I had aroused him. In a tone of complacent sorrow for my ignorance, Lead Belly spoke:

"Boss, I'se nothin' but a nigger. There never wus a nigger whut would keep his word—leastwise I never knowed none. I thought you knowed dat. I'se hungry, boss. Ain't you gwine to give me no money? I'll never do thisaway no mo'."

He got his money. This was the first, in fact the only time, in all my experience with him that he voluntarily confessed to a fault. But this was the only time he ever claimed to be hungry. Afterwards I found out that he had money in his pockets while he was complaining to me.

As a punishment and because he often spent his allowance for drink, the next day I only gave him money before each meal. I paid his lodging in advance, but held him to a fixed amount, one meal at a time. He chafed under these restrictions and grew morose and nearly sullen on our next two or three trips. Finally, one day he drove

squarely against a red light in Montgomery, over my protest and entreaty, out into a bedlam of warning horns and the shouts of excited drivers.

"Why did you do that?" I demanded.

"You told me to," he replied.

"I don't think I'm crazy. I did not tell you to drive into a crowded street against a red light."

"Yes, you did, suh."

"Stop the car, Lead Belly. Listen. I did not give a foolish order that might have cost our lives. And you must not say again that I did."

"Yas, suh, I saw de red light burning. I promised always to mind you. You told me to drive on across—"

"Take your guitar and get out of this car," I told him.

He quickly disappeared in the traffic.

For three days I continued my work alone in the vicinity of Montgomery without word from Lead Belly. Every day I expected to see him at my hotel. He never came. Evidently our parting was final. I was unhappy over my hasty anger. But there seemed nothing I could do. He had changed his boarding place, and I could not find him. One morning in a driving rain I started to the Atmore Prison Farm two hundred miles away. At the post office on my way out of town I found some interesting mail. As I sat on the steps reading it Lead Belly suddenly appeared. I stopped him.

"Lead Belly," I said, "I have been thinking over what happened between us several days ago. It may be that you misunderstood me, that you thought I told you to drive out into the street across the red light. If that be true, I owe you an apology which I now make. I am on my way south. Do you want to drive for me again?"

"I sholy do, boss; I sholy do."

In a few moments we were on our way, the end of this journey again being Shreveport and Martha.

Lead Belly never again referred to this trouble. His charm for women had provided him with comfortable quarters, and an indulgent local relief board had furnished him a generous food allowance. Nor

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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did he make, then or afterwards, any inquiry about what I had been doing the three days we had been separated.

On our way we visited for two days the large state prison farm at Atmore, Alabama. One Saturday night, after the recording machine had broken down in the midst of our work, Lead Belly was asked to sing and play for the entire prison population. In order to reach the men down the long corridors of the big dormitory, he was forced to repeat his program seven times. His voice never flagged under this severe strain. "I kin sing all night long," he said. That day the convicts had each received twenty-five cents for their weekly tobacco allowance. At the close of Lead Belly's singing for the Negroes, one of the convicts passed his hat among the four hundred listeners. Afterwards Lead Belly told me proudly, "Dem boys gimme a few nickels an' mo' than three hundred pennies."

From Atmore we went to New Orleans, then on to Baton Rouge where we ferried the Mississippi River. A night drive enabled us to cover the five hundred miles to Shreveport in twenty-four hours.

I left Lead Belly with Martha, while I traveled on alone to Austin. As I had promised, I had delivered Lead Belly back home. I thought the adventure with him ended. But not so.

I had told him that my next trip would be to New York City, that with Alan in the car we would have no room for him. But almost daily letters from him followed me, repeating former promises of good behavior, begging that he be taken along. He wanted to teach Alan all his tricks on his guitar; he had found some new songs in Shreveport.

I had been invited to speak on Folk Songs before a section of the Modern Language Association of America, at its annual meeting in Philadelphia on December 30. When the program committee heard of Lead Belly I was asked to speak also at the annual smoker of the Association and to bring him along to sing some "sinful song" to illustrate the talk. Again I was tempted to throw caution to the winds, and, with some urging from Alan, again I fell.

Our recording machine had been built into the rear of the car. After some shifting a mechanic was able to squeeze in a back seat for

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me. A joyful and pliant Lead Belly joined us in Shreveport. The three of us, Lead Belly again proudly behind the wheel, drove away one afternoon in early December waving our good-bys to Martha as she stood leaning against her laundry building. Two guitars and much music shortened the way to Atlanta, Georgia. There a reluctant Prison Board held us up for several days.

One day while there we brought Lead Belly to our hotel room on the elevator and after a time took him down again on another car. Conversations between Lead Belly and two Negro elevator girls took place at our elbows, so to speak, without our being aware that anything had been said.

He told us later:

"Come down on de elevator wid dat Marina gal. (Marina people ain' white, got color, but they sometimes kinda spotty.) Ask her, say, 'Baby, you got a husban'?' An' she say, 'Yes!' like she mad, an' I say:

"Well, listen, ain' no chance fer me, den?"

"Naw!!"

"You ain' mad, is you?"

"Naw!"

"An' I tell her, 'Okey-dokey.'

"She wanted somebody to go wid her. She didn' have no husban' either, you know, jus' wanted to be stout.

"Den I come down on de elevator wid dat teasin' brown-skin gal. I ask her, says, 'Baby, you got a husban'?'

"Naw." (Sof', an' teasin', an' sweet.)

"Ain' no chance for me?"

"Yeah—ef you stay here while."

"O.K.! Sweet mamma, O.K.!"

"I was jus' jivin'. I didn' care. Them fool women!"

We found more songs in Atlanta, still more in Milledgeville, with Lead Belly again acting as first assistant, since Alan had fallen ill with influenza. Always the nimble fingering of his guitar and his singing helped to bring out the best talent among the convicts. One morning in Columbia, South Carolina, he came to our hotel room and sat for

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a long time without speaking a word save for his "Good morning, boss." Finally, on my inquiry he said that one of his jaw teeth was aching. We tried aspirin and other simple remedies, but the pain continued intense. That afternoon he drove me out for a conference with the warden of the penitentiary. I left him, miserable and silent, to wait outside the prison walls. When I got back to the car I noticed some drops of blood, which he explained:

"I tried to pull out de tooth with dem automobile pliers, but it kept on slipping off 'cause I couldn' get a good holt on it. I'd rather pull it myself than have one o' dem dentist mens jabbing at it." Later Alan found a Negro dentist who killed the nerve of the tooth.

North Carolina, and its penitentiary at Raleigh, held us for three days. We then moved on to Washington, arriving on Christmas Eve. That night Lead Belly entertained Major Isaac Spalding and guests, and on Christmas Day sang for two groups of newspaper people. Early that morning from the Christmas tree in the room of my son, John, Jr., Lead Belly received three presents.

"De fus' time Santa Claus has thought of me in five years," he declared.

In Philadelphia, meanwhile, the interest of the newspapers had been aroused by his queer name on the program of the Modern Language Association. Reporters crowded into my room, while I hid Lead Belly. His singing and playing while seated on the top center of the banquet table at the smoker before a staid and dignified professorial audience smacked of sensationalism. Nothing like this had ever before happened. And the delighted listeners filled his hat with silver and with dollar bills. Another audience flocked to hear him at the Popular Literature section next day. That same night a group of Bryn Mawr intellectuals in evening dress listened curiously to "Dicklicker's Holler" and "Whoa, Back, Buck!" As we drove into the college campus, where he played in the home of former President Thomas, he asked me:

"Boss, dis is one of de famous women's schools, ain't it?"

"Yes," I answered.

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"Well, maybe dey don't know it, but dey is about to hear de famous-est nigger guitar player in de world."

I then felt that he might interest New York. Philadelphia audiences had been an exacting testing ground. In the main Lead Belly's conduct seemed hopeful, and Alan's influence was potent with him. So on we drove, on New Year's Eve.

## NEW YORK CITY AND WILTON

"NEW YAWK! Capital of all de states in de world! Run under a mile of water to git in it! Subways up in de air, on de ground and under de ground through a solid rock! It scares me! Fifth Avenoo! Fifth Avenoo! New Yawk! New Yawk!"\* Triumphant and exultant, Lead Belly had come to town.

At last, after six thousand tortuous miles through Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, we drove into the city of Lead Belly's dreams. At our stopping places on the way his work had been behind prison walls. In a remote prison camp in South Carolina, he had even slept, locked up with the prisoners, in a convict's bed, while just outside Alan and I bunked with the guards. Again he was seeing black faces, convicts in stripes to whom he sang and who sang back to us; then on and on—from Shreveport to Austin, Houston, Galveston, New Orleans, Mobile, Montgomery, Birmingham, Atlanta, Milledgeville, Columbia, Raleigh, Richmond, Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia. Now New York. Who can tell what was passing through the mind of this black "boy," only five months removed from eleven years of confinement at hard labor on southern penitentiary farms? The evening before, white men in evening clothes and beautifully dressed women had praised his music and given him money. "One gemman gimme five dollars," exulted Lead Belly. Nothing like this had ever before happened to him.

No hotel or lodging house south of Harlem would take Lead Belly in with us. In Harlem the Negro Y.M.C.A. would not take us in with Lead Belly. We left him there as the safest place. We were forced

\* Lead Belly afterward "made up" a song containing these phrases.

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to separate, with him exposed to danger. For his protection and comfort we had hoped to have him lodge with us. He was lonely and frightened when Alan came away from his room, and he knocked at our door very early the following morning.

On that New Year's night, some friends gave us a party. Lead Belly sang and plucked his twelve-stringed "box" for a group coming from Columbia University and New York University. Present besides were publishers, writers, artists, editors, reporters, and others. His songs struck a fresh note. He pleased this miniature New York City. Keen-minded reporters scented a story. "Negro convict sings himself out of two penitentiaries and captivates New York," read the headlines!

"Lead Belly," I said, before he left us for the night, "tomorrow morning at eight come to our rooms. At nine you and I are to meet Mr. George Brett, Jr., the head of a very large firm which makes books. They think they may wish to print a book about you and your songs. Tomorrow is the most important day of your life. Be sure to come on time."

"You knows me, boss; I'll be there."

Restless and uneasy for his safety, for that night he was making the uptown trip alone, I waited for his knock the next morning. Two hours late he at last stood before me, a pitiable object—blear-eyed, loose-lipped, staggering; he muttered as he swayed past me to the refuge of Alan, his "little boss":

"I'se in my whisky, boss; I'se in my whisky. Cab Calloway offered me a thousand dollars to sing for him. If I wusn't so drunk I could make a million dollars today. But I'se in my whisky, I'se in my whisky."

He was probably poisoned by a mixture of drinks—cheap gin and whisky. He had not been in bed the night before. How had he come the long distance from Harlem to our rooms near Washington Square without falling into the hands of the police? Alan silenced his wild talk and put him to bed. He muttered, heaved, slept, throughout the day. That night Alan again saw him to sleep in Harlem.

As Lead Belly tossed and moaned and slept with a red bandanna over his face my telephone jangled almost continuously, for the queer

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name of Lead Belly in the headlines did its work well. The term "bad nigger" only added to his attraction. The *Herald Tribune* introduced him as "a powerful knife-toting Negro, a saturnine singer of the swamplands, who has killed one man and seriously wounded another. His voice causes brown-skinned women to swoon and produces a violently inverse effect on their husbands and lovers. A large scar which spans his neck from ear to ear bears witness to his dreadful charm and a knife that was fortuitously dull."

Came more reporters. Came theatrical agents and vaudeville impresarios armed with tempting contracts. One company brought a contract already written out mentioning a possible \$1,250 weekly income. Came an agent from the American Record Corporation. Came representatives from *Time* and the Associated Press for pictures and for interviews. A national radio company telephoned for a try-out in Rockefeller Center, and several publishing companies negotiated for his biography.

Later the poet, William Rose Benét, wrote a full-page ballad about him, and *Time* printed his picture and the story of his career. I do not know that he ever read the story, but one day I saw him sit for an hour gazing at his picture. "You is looking at de King," I overheard him say to Martha a week or two later as he showed the magazine to her.

The day following his spree Lead Belly appeared dazed and somewhat subdued from his first contact with "Harlem niggers." \* But he made no apology or explanation. Nor did he ever ask me the result of my conference with Mr. Brett. He never again referred to his failure to come with me to visit the publisher, except indirectly, for he once said: "I don't like whisky. Now gin cuts the 'gysm' in my th'oat and helps me to sing better! I ain't goin' to drink no mo' whisky, but I got to have my gin."

When New York south of Harlem refused to take Lead Belly in where he could live with us, and Harlem proved poison for him,

\* A week or so afterwards he began to "compose" his "New Yawk City" song. A reminiscent couplet runs:

When I get to Louisiana, gonna walk and tell,  
New Yawk City is a burnin' hell.

## Negro Folk Songs

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we were forced either to send him back South to Martha or to take a place where we could protect him, beguile him to sing his songs and tell his yarns, while Alan and I put his story together, filled the engagements we had contracted for and finished the March of Time news reel sponsored by *Time*. Two friends offered us their cottage fifty miles from New York City at Wilton, Connecticut, ideal in its isolation. So Alan and I moved out and established ourselves with Lead Belly as cook and laundryman. Involved in this move was my promise to Lead Belly to bring his Martha up from Shreveport. I wired her in Lead Belly's name. Back came a telegram saying that a week was necessary to sell her household effects. Lead Belly was disappointed and displeased: "I wants to telegram Marthy myself dis time," he said. And he wrote a message in the form of a letter:

Martha Promise I wants you to come on to New York now When I tells you sumpen means I wants you to do it and not wait Shut yo' doors and come on Some other Shreveport wimmen will come when I say come I looks for you tomorrow Come on I wants to marry you at once as you are my intended wife

HUDDIE LEDBETTER

The delayed reply caused Lead Belly to grow morose and gloomy. When the news that Martha was on the way finally came by telephone, he cried out in delight as he clapped his hands: "Blessed Jesus, massa, massa, my Boss! I'se de happiest nigger in de world." I must see them married, or they would get into trouble with New England laws.

In sending the money to Martha for her expenses from Shreveport to New York some annoying complications arose. For reasons of his own Lead Belly would not agree that Martha should be entrusted directly with the money. I visited a friend in an uptown bank, asking that they request their Shreveport correspondent to deliver to Martha a ticket to New York and put her on the train. Consultations followed, long telephone communications with headquarters, whispered conversations, head shakings. The problem was grave. In despair I sought my publishers. Their lawyer advised me not to touch the matter with "a forty-foot pole." At last the president of the publishing company wired a business friend in Shreveport who agreed to receive the money

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and put Martha on a train headed for New York City. Visions of the Mann Act and white slaves must have haunted bedsides for weeks thereafter.

"A comedy of errors, well wrought in accordance with the Aristotelian unities and infused with all the dramatic elements of love, hope, fear, despair and ultimate jubilation, was enacted at Pennsylvania Station yesterday in the forty-five minutes between noon and 12:45 P.M." Thus wrote Lincoln Barnett in a two-column *Herald Tribune* story of Lead Belly's meeting a delayed train bearing Martha Promise to the end of her journey from Shreveport, her first railroad trip. In the midst of a crowd of curious redcaps the two lovers rushed together and kissed while bulbs flashed making pictures for the New York tabloids.

Under the Connecticut law, at least as administered by an exacting woman town clerk at Wilton, I could find no way of having the wedding ceremony performed in my home until after a five days' wait. So the actual wedding was necessarily postponed, without, however, causing any discontent, embarrassment, or annoyance to Martha or to Lead Belly. These children of nature readily adjusted themselves to the situation. Finally, the day arrived.

The wedding was celebrated at our home in Wilton, a house two hundred years old, formerly the residence of Miss Frances Perkins, Secretary of Labor. At high noon one Sunday the Reverend Samuel Weldon Overton, once a minister in Hempstead, Texas, read the marriage ritual in the presence of reporters, photographers, and white and Negro friends. I gave the bride away, and Alan acted as best man.

After the ceremony Lead Belly in "an enchanting double-breasted cinnamon suit with red checks and white gloves," first soundly kissed Martha, then took off his gloves, seized his old green guitar and sang:

"A yaller woman keeps you worried all the time,  
A yaller woman makes a moon-eyed man go blin';  
But a brown-skinned woman makes a jack rabbit hug a houn'  
And a black-skinned woman makes a preacher lay his Bible down."

Then with a broomstick on his shoulder, he shuffled into a buck-and-wing dance, toasts were drunk, lunch served. That same afternoon he

## Negro Folk Songs

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gave a successful concert in Brooklyn at the home of the editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*. Meanwhile, two Associated Press stories about him, and his personal appearance in the *Time* magazine radio news, had made him a national figure.

Then came calls for Lead Belly and his guitar from groups in New York City as well as from Newark, Providence, Wallingford, Cambridge, Albany, Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, and other towns. The president of a college canceled a contract already made with us by his music department after he had read one of Lincoln Barnett's stories emphasizing the criminal side of Lead Belly's life. No ex-convict could appear on his rostrum.

As a part of these programs, and as a prelude to his playing, either Alan or I would tell the audience how and when and where we found him, while Lead Belly sat on the stage impassive, self-contained, seemingly uninterested. After Martha became an auditor, Lead Belly made his entrance at the conclusion of our preliminary talk. To add to the dramatic interest he would wear his old Louisiana convict clothes (not stripes) with a big red bandanna about his neck to hide the knife scar "when a man was pullin' it around my th'oat jes' tryin' to cut my head off." Many people could not understand his Negro vernacular, so that we usually explained each song before he played it, sometimes repeating in advance the principal stanzas.

He never failed to delight his audience when he "passed his hat" at the end of his program. Then he always became the smiling cajoling Southern darky minstrel extracting nickels from his "White folks." He would bow and thank each visitor with amusing comments, "Bless Gawd, dat's a dime! Where is all de quarters? Thank you, boss! Thank you, missy, thank you! Wait back dere, don' you see me comin'?" Even when I had agreed on a fixed fee he seemed always disappointed when he could not pass his hat.

For his programs Lead Belly always wished to include "That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine" or jazz tunes such as "I'm in Love with You, Baby." But in these he was only a poor imitator, though he could never understand why we did not care for them. We held him to the singing of music that first attracted us to him in Louisiana, some

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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of which he had "composed," at least partly. The lines of many, picked hither and yon, are jumbled together with but little original material, while the melodies he tricked out with musical ornaments of his own. Moreover, these were the songs he had practiced most while in and out of the penitentiary, since they were the money-getters from his white hearers. Their simple, direct appeal his fellow convicts and his barrel-house audiences also could enjoy. Intellectual people and the most lowly loved best his folk tunes and his manner of rendering them.

While he was partial to Alan and talked more freely to him, he always preferred me to "name de songs. Don't tell Mister Alan I said so," he would ask me. Usually I first announced something bright and lively, "Green Corn," "Bring Me Li'l Water, Silvy," or "Julie Ann Johnson." Then followed various selections as printed in this volume, the closing number usually being "Mister Tom Hughes's Town," "Blind Lemon," or "Irene." Always the audiences requested one of his "Pardon Songs," successful appeals for freedom addressed to Governor Pat Neff of Texas and Governor O. K. Allen of Louisiana.

Lead Belly played and sang his folk tunes before a great variety of people, from large crowds of Negro convicts to scholarly audiences. They all listened intently, and they applauded him generously. Audiences seemed to forgive the rough words of the songs, the crude lines of poetry, in their feeling of sympathy for the strange figure sitting before them. At Garden City two hundred men shouted for more, filling the hall with their clamorous approval. One night a small group of well-known New Yorkers filled his hat with bills, each woman dropping in a dollar, the men five dollars apiece. "My old twelve-string talked to 'em tonight, an' I got 'em, didn't I, boss? Let's get home to Marthy," he would say as we hurried to the Grand Central Station.

Martha Promise fitted easily into our life. She was and continued to be a happy bride. She and Lead Belly did all the work of the place, having quickly divided it between themselves—he the fire-maker, water-toter, washerman, car cleaner, snow shoveler, and dishwasher

## Negro Folk Songs

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helper; she the cook, bed-maker, ironer, house-cleaner. As a matter of fact there was little labor for two active strong people. Lead Belly would perhaps have been happier had more physical labor been given him. He had no lazy atom in his make-up. His claim that he had always been the "lead row man" was without doubt true. So long as he was at home with Alan and Martha and me the days, for the most part, passed easily and pleasantly. Only his contact with outside influences brought troubles on us and on himself. Alan made notes of his talk and songs, now and then recording new tunes, while Martha, always serene and quiet, sat and listened, rarely smiling, though evidently proud of her husband; yet Martha, when in Shreveport, had been a member of the Tri-State Jubilee Choir, and did not sing "sinful songs."

Martha was in love with him and had been since she was twelve; and in Wilton, as she often declared, she spent the happiest days of her life. Often Lead Belly sat in the kitchen all day and played with her, while his guitar leaned neglected in the corner. With this artist for her lover, she grew visibly plumper and prettier. Her warm laughter rang through the old house. In February she said about Lead Belly:

"I spec' he can swim on folks when he gits back to Shrevepo't, when they think he has lotsa money. But when he gits broke, they gonna kick him out, they ain' gonna know him—it's gonna be jus' like it was when he got back from de pen. Then he gonna come rackin' back to me, an' it ain' nothin' doin'."

But by April she had told us:

"I b'lieve if that man leaves me or goes to some other woman, I won' keer 'bout livin' no mo'."

Lead Belly's supreme self-confidence once caused him complacently to dose Martha when she became quite ill; Martha swallowed, seemingly without alarm, three or four dismal-looking concoctions, forbidding in color and taste.

"I knows whut I'se doing," quoth Lead Belly; "I can cure any disease. Now I—I never was sick in my life."

As usual, however, he had a facility for burying unpleasant memories. He had forgotten about the toothache that had struck him at Columbia,

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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South Carolina. After we came on to Wilton the pain returned tenfold from an abscess that formed at the base of the wounded tooth. Heroic means became necessary; so Alan took him in to the dental clinic of New York University. There the offender was pulled. Lead Belly came out alone by train to South Norwalk and phoned me: "Come down, boss, and git me. Bring Marthy." So Martha and I hurried away in the car. The first words he spoke, after he had kissed her, were, "I wants a chicken." And he ate the whole fowl for his supper.

South Norwalk, ten miles from our home in Wilton, with its Negro colony of two groups, one revolving around the Negro minister who married them, the other around Martha's hairdresser, furnished Lead Belly and Martha occasional association. They used our car and would now and then spend an afternoon or evening with their new-made friends. His Norwalk intimates flattered his vanity, furnished him drink, and, according to his own story, offered him contracts that would bring the money rolling in.

Gradually Lead Belly's attitude began to change towards Alan and me. He gave grudging consent to meet engagements I had made for him. For days at a time Alan could get no stories or songs from him, and his refusals were sometimes gruff and unpleasant. He became less attentive to household duties; his cheerful good mornings grew rarer; his demands for extra money more frequent. In the kitchen empty gin bottles increased in number.

For his wedding I had bought him a completely new outfit, from shoes to hat. The week after his marriage he asked for another suit that struck his fancy. I bought it. Whereas he had started the trip without a coat he now owned four winter suits and all accessories. In addition, our table was abundant, and he had the same home comforts as his two "bosses." He had money in his pocket, he had his Martha by, and he had his freedom. Yet he grew silent, remote, his face a gloomy mask. The happy life of our pretty cottage in the hills was marred by his evident discontent.

The time arrived now for the long drive I had planned to make alone with him to Albany, Rochester, Buffalo, and then back to Cambridge and Harvard University.

## Negro Folk Songs

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Lead Belly had readily agreed to go on this trip, but when I reminded him a day ahead that we were starting on Sunday March 3, he looked gloomily past me and said:

"I don't want to leave Marthy. She says the rats scares her at nights."

I called Martha in from the kitchen. She laughed: "Them rats sho did scare me one or two nights when I fust come. They sounded as big as hosses running up and down in the upstairs. But I'm over that now. Mister Alan will stay with me. I don't needs to expect Huddie to be with me ev'ry night when he's out wuckin'. He can't be."

A few moments later she said to me: "He's all right. He jes' wanted to grumble a little. He's out there now rubbin' on that car. That nigger is sho proud of a automobile." And again she laughed.

At Albany, the first night out, Huddie played and sang for a group of Professor Harold Thompson's friends gathered in his home. The following day we reached the University of Rochester, twenty-four hours ahead of our schedule. We were lodged in the college dormitory, his room opening into mine.

He had fallen into one of his taciturn moods as we came over the ice-covered roads between Albany and Syracuse, though he drove steadily and skillfully. He said little through the long tiresome day except to inquire now and then, "How fur is it back to Marthy?" Experience had taught me to leave him alone in his gloomy moments.

Knowing that he was uncomfortable with none of his own color about, the next morning I told him to take the car and visit the Negro section of Rochester while I called on my friend Donald Gilchrist, the University librarian.

"I'll git back here before you does," said Huddie.

I didn't see him again for nine hours.

He and my automobile disappeared as completely as if swallowed by an earthquake. When he did not report for lunch, Theodore Fitch of the music department took me in his car through both the Negro districts of Rochester. When we had about despaired of finding him, a Negro in a low beer joint reported that he had seen Huddie driv-

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ing around with a new-found friend from Louisiana. Our search went on. Finally, we went to Police Station No. 2 and reported a lost car with a Negro driver. The radio barked out the number of the car with a Texas license.

"Bring the car and driver to Station 2," were the instructions. Within five minutes the entire police force of Rochester was on the lookout for a Ford V-8, 1934, Texas license.

"We will have your car and Negro directly," assured the captain.  
He was wrong.

I waited in that station for four hours. Two special groups of policemen went out on motorcycles and returned; but no car, no Lead Belly.

Immediately following the radio warning the station telephone began to jangle with reporters inquiring if the lost Negro was the famous desperado, Lead Belly, from Louisiana. The officers answered evasively. One persistent reporter came to the police station and watched me as he loitered for three hours waiting for something to happen; then he drifted reluctantly out, searching for more stirring sensations.

At six o'clock Mr. Fitch and I agreed on a plan for me alone to attempt to entertain the student audience. He drove me back to my room. My car stood in front of the dormitory. In his room sat Lead Belly, holding in his two hands a big ham bone. As I entered the room he said to his companion between bites, "Dis is de best piece of nigger ham I'se eat since I left Louisiana."

"Hello, boss."

"Where have you been?" I asked.

"I found some of my color and been stayin' wid dem."

"Why didn't you telephone? I've been uneasy lest you were in trouble."

"Don' you ever worry about me, boss. When I gits in trouble I'll always phone you. Why, ef dey puts me in jail dem policemen would let me phone you."

I called him into my room, away from the penniless black tramp he had picked up, to find out if he were able to sing at the concert only an

## Negro Folk Songs

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hour away. Although he reeked with liquor, I decided, after he'd sung for me the "Death Letter Blues," to let him try.

That night Lead Belly was not even at his second best. His voice was weak and uncertain, especially on the "calls" and "hollers" that always pleased. But he got through, and the students cheered him lustily. At least his songs were new; nothing like them had been heard in Rochester. After the concert I took him and his companion to a private room.

"Lead Belly," I said, "you know I have tried to help you, that everything I have asked you to do has been for your own good. Tomorrow night comes the most important engagement we have on this trip. I expect you to show those Buffalo people how you can sing. I'll drive your friend back to town. Now, I want you to go to bed and get a good night's rest so that you will be in fine trim tomorrow."

He picked up his guitar and hat and left me, declaring that he had promised to take his friend back to town, some miles away, to a party, that I wasn't treating him right, that he was going back to a birthday celebration, that he never broke engagements, that he would keep his promises to his own color.

His friend lingered and explained: "The boy has found him a little brown-skin out on —— Street, and you just can't stop him. Nobody can stop him."

I had told Lead Belly he must not go. For the first time, he had flatly disobeyed me. I had lost Lead Belly.

As he left he pledged his "word of honor" that he would not stay out later than 11:30. The next day on my inquiry he said that he had reached his room at 1:30 A.M. He waked me several times during the night, moving in his room, for I, too, slept fitfully. His light shone under the door jamb. Down at Angola, Louisiana, "where the lights burn all night long," for five years he had slept with the white electric light blazing in his face. He cannot sleep soundly otherwise. I fancy, however, that he slept not at all that night. When I went into his room the next morning he was lying dressed in bed reading a newspaper. He didn't look up at my greeting. As we headed for Buffalo, Lead Belly seemed but little like the pleasant, cheerful, helpful person

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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he could be. His face was an ebony mask—glum, dour, and forbidding. He was gloomily silent. Perhaps he thought of Martha or of the brown-skin girl left behind in Rochester.

At Buffalo I put Lead Belly up at the colored Y.M.C.A. and took him to his quiet and comfortable quarters. I begged him to rest before he sang that night at the University of Buffalo. This he failed to do, as I discovered afterwards, because he was busy hunting up another lodging house. The new brick Y.M.C.A. building didn't suit him, because "it didn't have no elevator." He chose a low, dirty back room on the ground floor, down an alley, not more than four feet wide, on Williams Street.

At the concert, later in the evening, a persistent young lady reporter interviewed "Mr. Lead Belly." I found him enthusiastically telling her about a fight he had once had "wid six niggers. Dey come at me all at one time. I popped my knife in dis one and dat one and soon had all dem niggers lyin' on de ground and bleedin'. I nebber bidders anybody lessen dey boder me," he earnestly assured the delighted girl reporter as she furiously scribbled her notes.

Instead of handing me his hat collection, as was his custom, he told me that he would bring it to me the following day. The next morning I talked ballads to the students of the Buffalo State Teachers College. At the end of the hour Lead Belly sang two songs and the Dean gave him more money. Now, for the first time in many years, he had a bulging purse. While we had waited behind the curtain for the students to come into the assembly hall, I saw a changed Lead Belly.

I made one more appeal to him. I reminded him that I was trying to help him, that I had made only a few requests of him, and those for his protection in a strange country; that I wanted him to eat good food, to take plenty of rest, not to play and sing for groups of Negroes late at night, and not to drink too much. I recalled to him my promise to Martha not to let him waste his money.

He silenced me by declaring resentfully that he knew exactly how to take care of himself. "I ain't goin' to sing no mo' for you neither lessen I wants to; an' I ain't goin' nowha lessen you bring Marthy along, too," he added as a final shot.

His tone and manner were final. I had neither the power nor the wish to discipline him. I could cajole and humor him out of his sullen moods; I had no heart to meet open and angry defiance. Some one else might help him; I had failed. We were together some weeks afterwards, but I never again advised him.

The next afternoon I was working in the trustees' room at the Grosvenor Library. In walked Lead Belly. He had swapped his comfortable black overcoat for a gray and green combination with loud checks.

"Gimme ten dollars," he demanded.

"I'll give you no more money, now."

"It's my money, and I'm goin' to have it."

He looked dangerous. The moment had come about which friends and prison wardens had warned me. For we were alone and I carried no arms. All this flashed through my mind as Lead Belly again said, "I wants my money." He started towards me threateningly.

The door opened, and Judge Louis Hart walked in.

Lead Belly recognized him, and no quick-change artist was ever transformed more suddenly or magically than he. Lead Belly knew me thoroughly, but the Judge was an unknown quantity.

"Howdy, Judge?" said a smiling, affable Lead Belly. "I'se pleased to meet you again."

I told the Judge that Lead Belly wanted more money, that he had evidently been wasting money in carousing, and that I was unwilling to furnish the means for further debauch that would unfit him for our last engagement before the University Club of Buffalo on Saturday night.

"What have you done with the money I saw you get the other night?" inquired Judge Hart.

"Why, Judge, I bought fo' dresses fo' Marthy."

"And the balance? It wasn't safe for you to carry so much money around in that part of town."

"I puts it into a savings bank."

"What savings bank?"

"Oh, down where I stays on Franklin Street, Judge."

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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"There are no savings banks on Franklin Street," rejoined the judge.  
No reply from Lead Belly.

"Boss," he now said to me, "I hires me a cab to come up here. Dat mans is waitin' outside. He wants his money."

"That is your business," I answered.

"Thank you, boss, jes' de same." (Lead Belly was now talking for Judge Hart's benefit.) He left the room. On his way out he begged his cab fare from Librarian Schearer.

The following night he tried to sing before the University Club. He croaked instead of singing. His voice was quite gone. The concert was a failure. The kind-hearted audience could not be interested in my story of the sorry-looking figure sitting before them.

"I'se never goin' to sing for no bunch of niggers no mo'," said Lead Belly to me. "I always sings too loud an' too long." Again he had been out the night before, singing for his own color.

At the University Club I gave him money for his supper and bed and told him to meet me at my room at six the next morning. He was there ahead of time. Again I was alone on the highway with a Negro ex-convict, a double murderer, a reckless jail breaker grown into an egomaniac—"de best, de lead-row man, at everything I tries to do." As usual Lead Belly was at the wheel, this time for a drive of nearly three hundred miles over the mountains by the Cherry Valley route to Albany, where Alan and Martha were to meet us.

The last day he spent in Buffalo, Lead Belly, although he perhaps did not know it, was practically under arrest. Detective Stegeman, a special officer assigned to Judge Louis Hart, visited him twice, and told him that on any outbreak or disorder he would ship him to Louisiana. He took away his knife, and brought him in his automobile to the last concert.

Out of Buffalo and for twenty miles down the road Lead Belly drove without speaking. At our first stop for gasoline he disappeared. He came back quickly bringing me two cigars and a stack of matches. As I smoked and our car moved on I felt reassured and more at ease since we had left Rochester.

During the three nights we had spent in Buffalo I had slept but

little. I suffered intense mortification and humiliation at my failure to influence Lead Belly. I had planned to take a former Negro criminal back to Texas, changed to a good citizen. The way had seemed easy. No hope for it now. Moreover, the blame would be rightly laid at my door should Lead Belly in his wild night life kill some one. What excuse could I make for turning such a man loose in a city? I was filled with terror at my position and responsibility. Try as I might, I could not drive such thoughts from my mind. So I rolled and tossed, sleepless, through the nights.

Now, as Lead Belly piloted the car over the snow-lined highway the reaction from these nights of worry and overwrought nerves almost overcame me. I became deathly sick. I told Lead Belly that I might die suddenly in the car. This idea was not pleasant to him; for this one time he took his eyes off the road as he looked at me fearfully, saying, "Boss, I don' think you looks so bad." At no time afterwards did he mention Buffalo or the money he had put into the Franklin Street savings bank.

Arriving at Albany, I took him to a Negro rooming house, examined his room, and asked him to go to bed early. Then I went to find Martha, who was traveling with Alan from New York City. Within an hour I was back with her. I knocked at his room door, and pushed Martha in. As I pulled the door shut I saw her lean over the bed where Lead Belly lay, as he stretched out his arms to her. Poor Martha!

By the next morning Lead Belly's voice had cleared, somewhat. His three Albany concerts went well. Fifteen hundred students packed the auditorium of the New York State College for Teachers. Two days later he was greeted enthusiastically by two large Harvard audiences, one the Poetry Society of Cambridge, the other sponsored by Dean Kenneth Murdock, with Professor George Lyman Kittredge as the master of ceremonies. As he listened to Lead Belly, Professor Kittredge whispered to me, "He is a demon, Lomax." I told Lead Belly. "De demon means de head man," he said. "Dat ol' man knows whut he is talkin' about."

On our way to Wilton we stopped at Wilbraham Academy, where he

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## As Sung by Lead Belly

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sang to the faculty and students. Lead Belly had never sung or played better than in his last four appearances on this part of the trip; and, after twenty-four hours of Martha, his conduct was above reproach. Within twenty minutes after we were in our Wilton home, Lead Belly, on his own motion, was busily scrubbing clothes on an old-fashioned washboard.

The days following our home-coming to Wilton, where Martha had married Lead Belly and where she seemed happy in helping to make Alan and me comfortable, confirmed the conviction that I had lost control of my "man." Never again would he have genuine respect for his "boss." For Lead Belly had disobeyed me and had "got away with it." He had defied me, and I had no recourse. "I knows what to do fur myself." He probably never had trusted me. My dream of setting up him and Martha on a farm stocked with cattle, pigs, chickens, etc., with a room in the house unlocked only when "de big boss and de little boss" came to visit,\* was only a dream. It was I who wanted the pretty home for them, not Lead Belly and perhaps not Martha. What they both planned first was a big, shiny automobile, lots of flashy clothes; and Lead Belly's most satisfying home seemed Fannin Street, Shreveport, "where dey don't 'lows you to go till you puts long pants on!" And there I determined he should go, and very soon.

After a week at Wilton I told him and Martha that our original plan of traveling South together in my car was not possible; then I asked them if they would like to go back to Shreveport at once. They agreed joyously and chose the Greyhound bus. It was precisely what they wanted to do. In ten minutes Lead Belly was packing up. He had come away with me from Texas with a small paper sack for a valise. Now he had two bulging leather cases, besides packages and a new guitar. Paying out nothing for board, lodging, and laundry, he and Martha had spent three hundred and fifty dollars in two months, when her four dollars a week had once supported them both.

When we told him good-by in the Greyhound bus station near the Pennsylvania Depot in New York City, he had been changed by a

\* Lead Belly's suggested arrangement.

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little prosperity, and possibly through our own mistakes in dealing with him, into an arrogant person, dressed in flashy clothes, a self-confident boaster; he pocketed silently the drafts and money I handed him, Martha standing by helpless, speechless, with lifeless cold hands—an unhappy finale to an exciting and interesting experience. That colorless good-by was the end. The little drama was played out. And yet the dominant feeling as we watched the Greyhound bus disappear in the maze of New York traffic was sadness. What the future holds for these two Negroes, only time will tell.

Poor Martha!

Poor Lead Belly!

When he and Martha got back to Shreveport his first letter, evidencing a complete reversal of attitude, read:

DEAR BOSS MAN

Just a few lines to let you an Mr Allen no we got home O K Martha was awful tired But i was all right Boss they got so much rite up about you and my self the peoples are after me to play at the Strain theater so i told them i would right you about it so if you want me to play i will Do so But i want you there to take care of the money i Don't want no white man in the world outside of you and Mr. Allen so Boss if you got a lots to do out there let Mr. Allen come on and he can take care of every thing so right me what you think about it the peoples have red so much of you and i untill I want to play i am just rarin to play for them i want to play in Dallas i am going to Dallas to see my daughter \* me and Martha.

By Boss Pleas take care of your self

Your man

HUDDIE LEDBETTER

SHREVEPORT LA EXCELSIOR LAUNDRY

\* Illegitimate child born to Lead Belly when he was fifteen years old. See "Lead Belly Tells His Story."

**PART II**  
**THE SINFUL SONGS**

## THE MUSICAL NOTATION USED IN THIS VOLUME

### AN EXPLANATION

By GEORGE HERZOG, PH.D.  
Columbia University

OUR system of writing music, or for that matter any system, is at best but a kind of shorthand. As such it suggests, rather than reproduces, a musical idiom. In order to express another idiom, it must be modified. In any case, unless one has some acquaintance with the idiom it is difficult to interpret even the most adequate system. Sufficient acquaintance may even compensate for gross inadequacies. Those who are familiar with southern Negro singing would not require the sort of representation here attempted. But those unversed in it may find that the signs employed enable them to experiment and eventually get the swing. Even those who know the sound and feel of Negro rhythm may be interested in this effort to discover and analyze just wherein it is different from the sort for which our customary notation is adequate. By forcing, it would have been possible to put a few more of these melodies into the strait-jacket of consistent measures, 3/4, 4/4, or the like. But this cannot be done to most of the folk-blues without destroying the melody.

By the following signs, it is hoped to convey to the reader Lead Belly's songs as he actually sings them:

× (over a note) somewhat higher.

— (over a note) somewhat lower.

(If in the signature, these signs indicate that consistently throughout the song the tone is somewhat higher or lower.)

~ somewhat longer, but not more than half again as long; otherwise the note is written out with its full value.

~ somewhat shorter.

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strong glide or slur: glissando.



portamento.



tied incompletely; a pulse is still felt.



complete tie.



pitch of the tone is uncertain.



uncertain pitch, half spoken.



grace notes.

\ short rest, making no real break in time.

| broken bar lines, indicating tentative division, where a division into conventional bars is not feasible.

All songs are understood to have been sung an octave lower than noted. The metronome indications show that the speed increases as the melody is repeated over and over. The notation of speed and of rhythmic values becomes merely approximate in the songs marked "free" or "somewhat free." In some of these songs the rhythm approaches the freedom of prose speech. Obviously the spoken portion transcribed as a sample in "I'm All Out an' Down" is also only an approximation. In some songs the time signature is put in parentheses, to show the time indicated is fundamental to the rhythm of the song, but that not all bars have consistently that number of beats. As often as seemed practicable, variants have been added to the transcription of the model stanza. Syllables or short words are put in parentheses where they could not be heard on the record.\* A longer section in parentheses indicates that the corresponding part of the music was missing, and was entered from another stanza—for instance, when the singer stopped, letting the guitar alone carry the melody for a line or two. The long rests, especially at the end of lines in the blues, were as a rule written out in full, although their length is probably somewhat variable and they might be shorter if there were no guitar accompaniment.

\* All the transcriptions were made from records of Lead Belly's singing.

## REELS

Slavery-time tunes for "squares" and "plays"

## GWINE DIG A HOLE TO PUT DE DEVIL IN

A square dance, very fast, with the very devil in it. Give the fiddler a dram, and he "don' give a damn" about anything but making the music and the girls skip swifter. As Lead Belly sings "Don' give a damn, Don' give a damn," his face flashes with laughter and defiance to all old men, preachers of hell-fire, and lawmakers. In that one line and his way of singing it for dancing, he seems to give away the gay and dangerous spirit of a dance in a countryside which believed that you could fry in hell forever, and that the singing fiddle was the Devil's own instrument.

*Very light and swift*

$J=104-120$

The musical score consists of five staves of music in common time with a key signature of one sharp. The first staff begins with a dotted half note followed by eighth notes. The second staff starts with a sixteenth note. The third staff begins with a quarter note. The fourth staff starts with a sixteenth note. The fifth staff begins with a sixteenth note. The lyrics are integrated into the music, with each line of text corresponding to a staff. The lyrics are:

Gwine dig a hole to put de dev - il in,  
 Gwine dig a hole to put de dev - il in.  
 Gwine dig a hole, Gwine dig a hole,  
 Gwine dig a hole, Gwine dig a hole.  
 Doo - da - deed - le - um - too - ti - yah,  
 Don' wan' to meet her in de worl' no - wha.

<sup>1</sup> These figures have the value of 5/16.

<sup>2</sup> The double tie indicates a slur (glissando).

## Negro Folk Songs

---

Gwine dig a hole to put de devil in,  
Gwine dig a hole to put de devil in.

Gwine shake a pole to put de devil in,  
Gwine shake a pole to put de devil in.

Talk about fiddler's, fiddler's dram,  
Talk about fiddler's, fiddler's dram.

Gwine set down by Abyham,  
Gwine set down by Abyham.

Don' give a damn, don' give a damn.  
Don' give a damn, don' give a damn.

Don' give a damn . . . (*Guitar repeats "Don' give a damn"*)  
Don' give a damn . . .

Gwine dig a hole to put de devil in,  
Gwine dig a hole to put de devil in.

Gwine dig hole . . .  
Gwine dig hole . . .

Gwine shake a pole . . .  
Gwine shake a pole . . .

Doo-da-deedle-um-too-ti-yah,  
Don' wanna meet her in de worl' nowha.

Doodle-da-deedle-um-too-yo,  
Don' want to meet her nowha she go.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

Talk about fiddler's, fiddler's dram,  
Don' give a damn, don' give a damn.

Settin' down side of Abyham,  
Settin' down side of Abyham,

And so on, across the night until Sunday morning.

### PO' HOWARD

"Ol' Howard is dead an' gone," and nobody can be very sorry, for didn't the "po' boy" leave Lead Belly here to sing this song? When Lead Belly plays "the Spanish fandang" and sings "Po' Howard" nobody can be sad, because, first, Lead Belly, then his guitar, and then both of them together talk to your toes. "If you can't dance, your foot's gonna pat."

Lead Belly learned "Po' Howard" along with "Green Corn" when he was fourteen and used to follow two young courting fellows who carried a guitar and a mandolin and played for square dances around Mooringsport. That was before Lead Belly had a guitar of his own, when he couldn't sleep at night for thinking about one.

## Negro Folk Songs

$\text{♩} = 92-112$

The musical score consists of six staves of music in common time with a key signature of one sharp. The first staff begins with a forte dynamic. The lyrics are: "Po' How-ard's dead an' gone, Lef' me here to sing this song." The second staff continues the melody. The third staff starts with "Ol' How - ard's dead an' gone," followed by a repeat sign. The fourth staff continues with "Ol' How - ard's dead an' gone," followed by a repeat sign. The fifth staff starts with "Ol' How - ard's dead an' gone, Lawd, Lawd," followed by a repeat sign. The sixth staff concludes with "Lef' me here to sing this song." A small bracket under the first two staves is labeled "Var. 1."

Po' Howard's dead an' gone,  
Lef' me here to sing this song.  
Po' Howard's dead an' gone,  
Lef' me here to sing this song.  
Ol' Howard's dead an' gone,

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

Ol' Howard's dead an' gone,  
Ol' Howard's dead an' gone, Lawd, Lawd,  
Lef' me here to sing this song.

Who's been here since I been gone?  
Big black nigger wid a derby on.  
Who's been here since I been gone?  
Big black nigger wid a derby on.  
La-awd, wid a derby on,  
Big black man wid a derby on,  
Big black man wid a derby on, God knows,  
Big black man wid a derby on.

The day I lef' my mother's do',  
The day I lef' my home;  
The day I lef' my father's do',  
The day I lef' my home;  
The day I lef' my friends,  
The day I lef' my friends,  
The day I lef' my friends, God knows,  
The day I lef' my friends.

Ol' Howard's dead an' gone,  
Lef' me here to sing this song.  
Ol' Howard's dead an' gone.  
Lef' me here to sing this song.  
Ol' Howard is a po' boy,  
Ol' Howard is a po' boy,  
Ol' Howard is a po' boy, God knows,  
Ol' Howard is a po' boy.

## GREEN CORN

## A FIDDLE SING

Lead Belly always sings this old-fashioned air tenderly and joyfully, as if softly and pleasantly drunk on green-corn whisky just off the mash. A feeling of spring runs through the song, the sound of sappy fodder rustling in a June wind; and each repetition of "green corn" is like a young corn sprout pushing up through the brown earth. Maybe the first roasting ears of the year are steaming on the stove, perfuming the house with their sweet green smell.\* At any rate, "Green Corn" is an old song for square dancing and one of the first pieces that Lead Belly learned to play on the guitar—an air that probably came down to him from his slave ancestors. It is common among white fiddlers in the South.

*d=96-116*

Green corn, come a - long Chol - ly, Green corn,  
come a - long Chol - ly, Green corn, green corn.

Stan' a - roun', stan' a - roun' the jim - my - john,  
Stan' a - roun', stan' a - roun' the jim - my - john,

\* In Georgia "green corn" is roasting ears roasted in the shuck. According to an old Negro man in Georgia, who was table boy when "freedom come," they used to sing it, "Green corn, dominecker, dominecker," etc.

As Sung by Lead Belly

---



Stan' aroun', stan' aroun'. Wake snake, day's a-break-in',  
Green corn, green corn,



Peas in de pot an' de hoe - cakes a - bak - in'.

Green corn, come along Cholly,  
Green corn, come along Cholly,

*Refrain:*

Green corn,  
Green corn.

Stan' aroun', stand aroun' the jimmy-john,  
Stan' aroun', stand aroun' the jimmy-john,

*Refrain:*

Stan' aroun',  
Stan' aroun'.

Gwine tell, gonna tell Polly,  
Gwine tell, gonna tell Polly,

*Refrain:*

Green corn,  
Green corn.

Wake snake, day's a-breakin',  
Peas in de pot an' de hoecakes a-bakin'. (*Refrain.*)

Peas in de pot an' de hoecakes a-bakin',  
Wake snake, de day's a-breakin',  
(*The guitar sings, "Green corn."*)

Two little boys to call me poppa,  
One name Sop an' udder name Gravy. (*Refrain.*)

## Negro Folk Songs

One name Sop an' de udder name Gravy,  
One gonna put up an' de udder gonna save it.

Green corn, come along Cholly,  
Green corn, gwine tell Polly,  
Green corn,  
Green corn, . . .

### HA, HA, THISAWAY

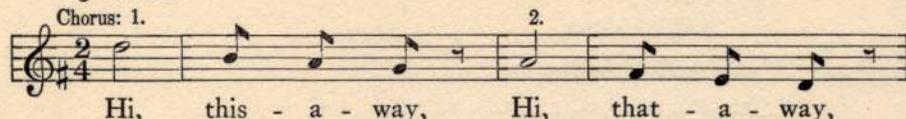
I once asked Lead Belly what he played during recess at school. "Ball." Did he play ball all the year round, every day? Yes, he played ball and nothing else.

But Martha qualified this statement. She reminded him that when the girls, on their side of the schoolhouse, played ring games, especially where kissing was involved, the ball games of the other side broke up and the boys joined them. The following song is the "play" that Lead Belly best remembers from school days. Of course, the words here may be quite different from those he sang as a child, but they could come straight from the lips of a little Negro boy dancing in the road.

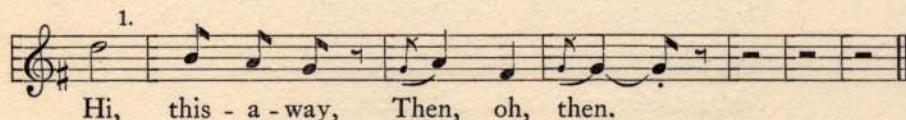
*Not sorry*

$\text{♩} = 80-112$

Chorus: 1.



2.



As Sung by Lead Belly

The musical score consists of four staves of music in common time with a key signature of one sharp. The lyrics are integrated into the music. The first staff contains the line 'lit - tle boy, When I was a lit - tle boy,'. The second staff contains 'twelve years old, Pa - pa went an' left me,'. The third staff contains 'left me, left me, Pa - pa went an' left me, to'. The fourth staff begins with 'save my soul.' followed by '3rd Verse Ho, ho' and concludes with 'Ha, ha' under 'Var. 1.' and 'Ha, ha' under '2.'.

When I was a little boy, little boy, little boy,  
When I was a little boy, twelve years old,  
Papa went an' left me, left me, left me,  
Papa went an' left me, to save my soul.

*Chorus:*

Hi! thisaway,  
Hi! thataway,  
Hi! thisaway,  
Then, oh, then.

Mamma come an' got me, got me, got me,  
Mamma come an' got me, to save my soul.  
Mamma didn' whiff me,\* whiff me, whiff me,  
Mamma didn' whiff me, so I was tol'.†

\* Lead Belly uses the words "whip" and "whiff" interchangeably.

† For some reason Lead Belly now and then omits the chorus which usually follows each four-line stanza.

## Negro Folk Songs

---

Papa drinked whisky, whisky, whisky,  
Papa drinked whisky, so I was tol';  
Mamma was frisky, frisky, frisky,  
Mamma was frisky, so I was tol'.

I went to school, went to school, went to school, boys,  
I went to school when I was twelve years old;  
Obeyed the rules, the rules, the rules, boys,  
Obeyed the rules as I was told.

Learned my lessin, lessin, lessin,  
Learned my lessin, as I was told.  
Wasn' that a blessin', blessin', blessin'?  
Wasn' that a blessin', to save my soul?

Liked my teacher, teacher, teacher,  
Liked my teacher, so I was told;  
Prayed like a preacher, preacher, preacher,  
Prayed like a preacher, to save my soul.

I went to school, went to school, went to school,  
I went to school when I was twelve years old,  
Teacher didn' whiff me, whiff me, whiff me,  
Teacher didn' whiff me, to save my soul.

*Chorus:*

Ho! ho! thisaway,  
Ha! ha! thataway,  
Ha! ha! thisaway,  
Then, oh, then.

### YOU CAIN' LOSE-A ME, CHOLLY

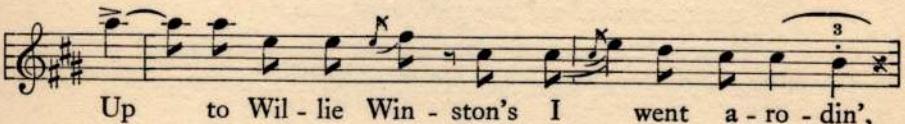
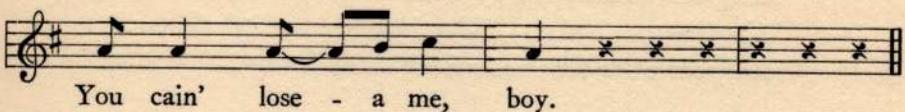
This old jig or a ragtime strut is fine for knocking the back-step  
and double shuffle or cutting the pigeon wing.

*Gay*

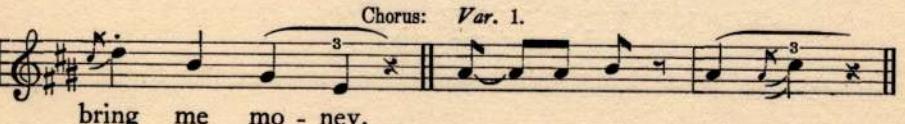
$\text{♩} = 84-104$

Chorus:

1.



Chorus Extra line in 4th stanza:



## Negro Folk Songs

---

Up to Willie Winston's I went a-rodin',  
Down on my knees I was doin' a little co'tin',  
Ev'y time she turn aroun' said it so funny,

*Chorus (after every stanza):*

You cain' lose-a me, Cholly,  
You cain' lose-a me, boy,  
You cain' lose-a me, Cholly,  
You cain' lose-a me, boy.

Hog an' de sheep, they went to the paster,  
Hog says to de sheep, "You better get a little faster."  
Ev'y time she turn aroun' said it so funny,

I went a-rowin' an' my girl went, too,  
Down on the bottom when de boat broke through,\*  
Ev'y time she turn around she said it so funny,

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Here's the last verse:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

I got a yallow gal I can't keep,  
Uses up a barrel o' money ev'y week;  
Ev'y time she turn aroun' she said it so funny,  
"I got a putty boy to bring me de money,

You cain' lose-a me, Cholly,  
You cain' lose-a me, boy,  
You cain' lose-a me, Cholly,  
You cain' lose-a me, cain?"†

\* Through the levee.

† Can you?

## Negro Folk Songs

One name Sop an' de udder name Gravy,  
One gonna put up an' de udder gonna save it.

Green corn, come along Cholly,  
Green corn, gwine tell Polly,  
Green corn,  
Green corn, . . .

### HA, HA, THISAWAY

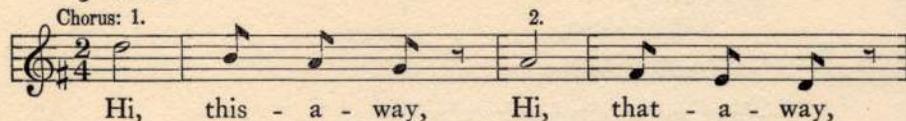
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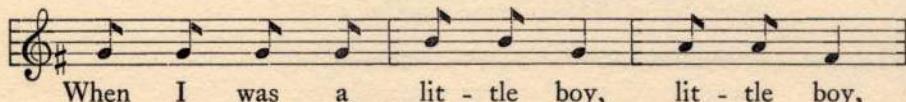
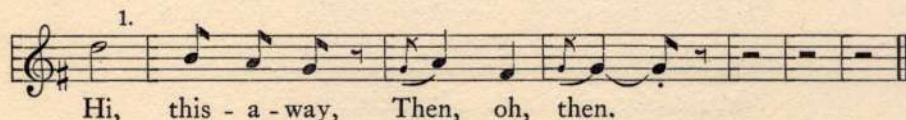
*Not sorry*

$\text{♩} = 80-112$

Chorus: 1.



2.



As Sung by Lead Belly

The musical score consists of four staves of music in common time with a key signature of one sharp. The lyrics are integrated into the music. The first staff contains the line 'lit - tle boy, When I was a lit - tle boy,'. The second staff contains 'twelve years old, Pa - pa went an' left me,'. The third staff contains 'left me, left me, Pa - pa went an' left me, to'. The fourth staff begins with 'save my soul.' followed by '3rd Verse Ho, ho' and concludes with 'Ha, ha' under 'Var. 1.' and 'Ha, ha' under '2.'.

When I was a little boy, little boy, little boy,  
When I was a little boy, twelve years old,  
Papa went an' left me, left me, left me,  
Papa went an' left me, to save my soul.

*Chorus:*

Hi! thisaway,  
Hi! thataway,  
Hi! thisaway,  
Then, oh, then.

Mamma come an' got me, got me, got me,  
Mamma come an' got me, to save my soul.  
Mamma didn' whiff me,\* whiff me, whiff me,  
Mamma didn' whiff me, so I was tol'.†

\* Lead Belly uses the words "whip" and "whiff" interchangeably.

† For some reason Lead Belly now and then omits the chorus which usually follows each four-line stanza.

## Negro Folk Songs

---

Papa drinked whisky, whisky, whisky,  
Papa drinked whisky, so I was tol';  
Mamma was frisky, frisky, frisky,  
Mamma was frisky, so I was tol'.

I went to school, went to school, went to school, boys,  
I went to school when I was twelve years old;  
Obeyed the rules, the rules, the rules, boys,  
Obeyed the rules as I was told.

Learned my lessin, lessin, lessin,  
Learned my lessin, as I was told.  
Wasn' that a blessin', blessin', blessin'?  
Wasn' that a blessin', to save my soul?

Liked my teacher, teacher, teacher,  
Liked my teacher, so I was told;  
Prayed like a preacher, preacher, preacher,  
Prayed like a preacher, to save my soul.

I went to school, went to school, went to school,  
I went to school when I was twelve years old,  
Teacher didn' whiff me, whiff me, whiff me,  
Teacher didn' whiff me, to save my soul.

*Chorus:*

Ho! ho! thisaway,  
Ha! ha! thataway,  
Ha! ha! thisaway,  
Then, oh, then.

### YOU CAIN' LOSE-A ME, CHOLLY

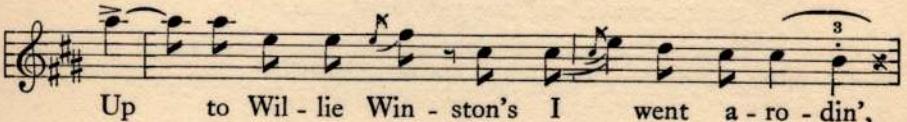
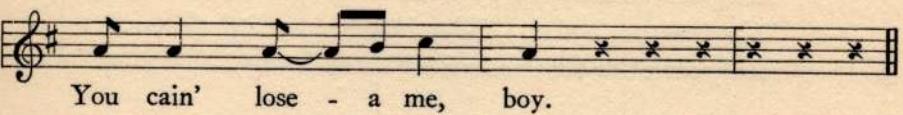
This old jig or a ragtime strut is fine for knocking the back-step  
and double shuffle or cutting the pigeon wing.

*Gay*

$\text{♩} = 84-104$

Chorus:

1.



Chorus Extra line in 4th stanza:



Chorus: *Var. 1.*



## Negro Folk Songs

---

Up to Willie Winston's I went a-rodin',  
Down on my knees I was doin' a little co'tin',  
Ev'y time she turn aroun' said it so funny,

*Chorus (after every stanza):*

You cain' lose-a me, Cholly,  
You cain' lose-a me, boy,  
You cain' lose-a me, Cholly,  
You cain' lose-a me, boy.

Hog an' de sheep, they went to the paster,  
Hog says to de sheep, "You better get a little faster."  
Ev'y time she turn aroun' said it so funny,

I went a-rowin' an' my girl went, too,  
Down on the bottom when de boat broke through,\*  
Ev'y time she turn around she said it so funny,

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Here's the last verse:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

I got a yallow gal I can't keep,  
Uses up a barrel o' money ev'y week;  
Ev'y time she turn aroun' she said it so funny,  
"I got a putty boy to bring me de money,

You cain' lose-a me, Cholly,  
You cain' lose-a me, boy,  
You cain' lose-a me, Cholly,  
You cain' lose-a me, cain?"†

\* Through the levee.

† Can you?

**WORK SONGS**

## WHOA, BACK, BUCK!

Lead Belly had an uncle who drove oxen for a living, and the old man would occasionally stop over with the family for a night. At such times, Lead Belly, rather than share a bed with him, would sleep on the floor; for the old fellow's dreams were thronged with balky oxen. He would be shouting and swearing at them all night long, and the boy was afraid. Lead Belly learned this song from him. The refrain is a jumble of commands to the oxen, along with the always recurring question, important for we do not know what reason, "Who made de backband?" The melody is kin to "Old Joe Clark," the well known mountain fiddle tune (see "American Ballads and Folk Songs," page 277), and a twin brother to the popular Negro square dance that usually begins, "Sometimes I plow my old grey horse."

It was long before we could persuade Lead Belly, who censors his songs for white audiences more than is required nowadays, to sing the second stanza. We brought him round at last by telling him that nobody in the North had ever cut a bull or seen one cut. "All right, then, I'll sing it," he replied. "I jes' didn't understand de sityation."

Whoa, back, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb!

Who made de backband? \*

Whoa, God-damn!

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

This man was drivin' twenty yokes o' oxen. † He was a long ways from home. An' it was slow drizzlin' rain an' de man was cold. He was a long ways f'om home, an' he was tryin' to git his oxens to hurry up a little faster. An' you know 'bout how much speed an oxen has got. 'Stead o' the oxen gittin' faster, they was speedin' up slower. Ev'y once in a while he'd look at 'em an' he cut down, *Ti-yow!* ‡ "Yay! back up there! Gee! Buck, whoa."

\* Oxen wear no backband. It is a broad strap slung over the backs of mules and horses when they are harnessed, serving to hold up the trace chains.

† Lead Belly, for dramatic purposes, exaggerates a little. No one man, at least, ever drove twenty yoke of oxen.

‡ A splendid sound, descriptive of the crack of the whip over the horns of the lead oxen,—an ox-whip with a stout six- or eight-foot stock of pecan or hickory and twenty feet of plaited leather or single strips of rawhide pieced together.

## Negro Folk Songs

$\text{♩} = 126-184$

Chorus:



Whoa, back, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb.



Who made de back - band? Whoa, God damn!



Whoa, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb.



Who made de back - band? Whoa, God damn!

Stanza:



Tom done buck an' Bill won' pull,



Pa - pa got to cut dat u-ddah li' - l' bull,

Chorus: \*



Whoa, back, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb.

etc. as above 1. Var.



Who made de back - band? Whoa, God damn!

\* The first form of the first two lines of the chorus occurs only at the beginning of the song.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Whoa, back, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb,  
Who made de backband?  
Whoa, God-damn.

Tom done bucked \* an' Bill won' pull,  
Papa gotta cut dat uddah li'l' bull.  
Whoa, back, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb,  
Who made de backband?  
Whoa, God-damn.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

He begin to think about his wife, eighteen, nineteen, twenty years ago, befo' he married her. He look way down de road, seem like he could see her,

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Whoa, back, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb!  
Who made de backband?  
Whoa, God-damn!

Eighteen, nineteen, twenty years ago,  
I taken Sal to de party-o,  
I taken Sal to de party-o,  
Wouldn' let her dance but a set or so.

Whoa, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb!  
Who made de backband?  
Cunningham.†

\* Probably balked.

† Cunningham in the old days leased large numbers of convicts from the State of Texas to work on his Brazos bottom plantation.

## Negro Folk Songs

---

I taken Sal to de party-o,  
Eighteen, nineteen, twenty years ago,  
All dressed up in her calico;  
Wouldn't let her dance but a set or so.

Whoa, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb!  
Who made de backband?  
Whoa, God-damn!

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

That man was tryin' to get home. He was talkin' to his oxens. Ev'y once in a while he'd pop his whup, *Ti-yow!* "Whoa! yay! git up there!" Sometime he run aroun' to their head an' rap 'em. He look way down de road an' tried to make some speed through that mud. He look way down de road an' think about his wife. He look right at her an' 'gin to holler.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Whoa, God-damn! Whoa, God-damn!  
Who made de backband?  
Whoa, God-damn!

Me an' my gal come a-walkin' down de road,  
Wind f'om her feet knockin' "Sugar in de Gou'd," \*  
Sugar in de gou'd an' de gou'd on de groun',  
Want to get de sugar got to roll de gou'd aroun'.

Whoa, back, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb!  
Who made de backband?  
Whoa! God-damn!

\* The name of an old fiddle tune.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

Chicken in de bread-pan, mighty good stuff,  
Mamma cook him chicken an' he never get enough;  
Jawbone walk an'-a jawbone talk,  
Jawbone eat it wid a knife an' fork.

Whoa, back, Buck, an' gee, by de Lamb!  
Who made de backband?  
Whoa! God-damn!

## BRING ME LI'L' WATER, SILVY

His uncle Bob Ledbetter had a wife named Silvy. In the middle of the morning, when Uncle Bob was plowing down at the lower end of the field and the sun was hot, he would holler at Silvy to bring him some water. After so long a time this holler developed into a little song that he would sing to his mules, when he thought about Silvy down the hill running to him with the water-bucket in her hand.

Such was the account Lead Belly gave us when he first sang "Bring Me Li'l' Water, Silvy." We asked him, when he played his piece for his white audiences, to tell them what it was about so they would understand who Silvy was and why the somebody was calling for water. The song that follows is the product of some fifty performances of "Silvy," the culmination of a development that began with the simple repetition of the first verse.

At first Lead Belly added only a simple description of the scene: The man was plowing, trying to clear a little piece of land, and he didn't have time to get water; so he called Silvy to fetch it. He had to call several times, and the verse was repeated. Then Silvy began to answer him and the second verse appeared. The next step came when the man began to answer Silvy. Later, however, Lead Belly dropped this detail and rounded out his little song with the last paragraph and the final verse. At almost every performance he added some new sentence or turn of phrase. The survivals were "two hottes' months in

## Negro Folk Songs

de year" and "better open up your ears a little wider so you can hear me callin' for water." This latter detail appeared last of all, and Lead Belly was still, so to speak, experimenting in placing it when he went home to Shreveport.

*Liltingly*  
 $\text{♩} = 88-108$

Bring me li' - l' wa - ter, Sil - vy,  
Bring me li' - l' wa - ter, now,  
Bring me li' - l' wa - ter, Sil - vy,  
Ev' - y li' - l' once in a whi - le.

*Var. 1.*

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Bring me li'l water, Silvy,  
Bring me li'l water, now,  
Bring me li'l water, Silvy,  
Ev'y li'l once in a while."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

This man was in de fiel', plowin'. An' he was tryin' to clear a li'l' piece of lan' down in de bottom. An' it was de two hottes' months in

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

de year, which is July an' August. He was tryin' to get through, an' didn' have time to go to the house to get him a drink of water. He called his wife de fus' time, an' Silvy didn' hear him, an' he called her again. Second time he called her, Silvy grabbed de bucket an' went a-runnin'.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Bring me li'l' water, Silvy,  
Bring me li'l' water, now;  
Bring me li'l' water, Silvy,  
Ev'y li'l' once in a while."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

When Silvy grabbed de bucket an' started to him, here what she said jus' befo' she got to her husban':

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Don't you see me comin'?  
Don't you see me, now?  
Don't you see me comin'?  
Ev'y li'l' once in a while."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

When she got near up to her husban', she wanted to holler again to let him know she was comin',

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Don't you hear me comin'?  
Don't you hear me, now?  
Don't you hear me comin'?  
Ev'y li'l' once in a while."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

He was down in de bottom plowin', an' he looked up an' saw his wife comin', an' he looked up an' commenced blowin' his horn again:

## Negro Folk Songs

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Bring me li'l' water, Silvy,  
Bring me li'l' water, now,  
Bring me li'l' water, Silvy,  
Ev'y li'l' once in a while."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

When Silvy got ready to go back to de house, he tol' her, says, "You better open up your ears a little wider so you can hear me callin' for water ev'y once in a while. I'm plowin' down here in de bottom, an' it's two hottes' months in de year, an' I'm burnin' down." Silvy looks aroun', an' he says, "Listen, now, I don' want to have to call you so many times before you hear me. I want you to open your ears up a li'l' bit so you can hear me when I holler:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Bring me li'l' water, Silvy,  
Bring me li'l' water, now,  
Bring me li'l' water, Silvy,  
Ev'y li'l' once in a while."

## PICK A BALE O' COTTON

The movement in picking cotton cannot follow any regular rhythm; but when a man sings a fast reel, like "Pick a Bale o' Cotton," he tries to keep time with it and therefore snatches the cotton faster than he would if there were no singing at all. Such a song lightens the work and, if anything could help a man pick a bale of cotton (fifteen hundred heavy pounds) in a day, it would be this merry, swaggering song, for in every stanza this tremendous lie is repeated and reiterated. It is a good lie and hurts nobody since every cotton-picker who hears it knows it never was the truth and never could be;

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

yet he wishes it might be so for him. And as the song rings around in his head, he believes some magic this time will fill his cotton sack faster, so that he will weigh out with a bale at the end of the day and be crowned the king of cotton pickers.

In other versions of this song (see same title in "American Ballads and Folk Songs") such lines as "Ol' massa tol' de niggers, Pick a bale o' cotton," and "Massa gimme one dram to Pick a bale o' cotton," are frequent. We are led to believe, therefore, that "Pick a Bale o' Cotton" is a slave song, another of the old Negro tunes the Texas prison system has kept alive, while the prisoners died. The tune and the rhythm indicate that it was probably a reel, danced during the cotton picking season after the day's work was done. It has close melodic relation to "Julie Ann Johnson" and is well known, especially among the older prisoners, throughout the Texas penitentiary system.

*Fairly fast and very gay*

$\text{♩} = 160-168$

The musical score consists of three staves of music in common time, key of G major (indicated by a sharp sign). The first staff starts with a quarter note followed by eighth notes. The lyrics are: "Jump down, turn a - roun', Pick a bale o' cot - ton,". The second staff continues with eighth notes. The lyrics are: "Jump down, turn a - roun', Pick a bale a day.". The third staff begins with a quarter note followed by eighth notes. The lyrics are: "Oh, Ju - lie, Pick a bale o' cot - ton, Oh, Ju - lie,". Below the third staff, the lyrics "Pick a bale a day." are written. The score includes markings for "1.", "2.", "Var. 1.", and "2." above the staves, and a "3" with a curved arrow indicating a variation or continuation.

Jump down, turn aroun',  
Pick a bale o' cotton;  
Jump down, turn aroun',  
Pick a bale a day.

## Negro Folk Songs

---

*Chorus:* \*

O Julie!  
Pick a bale o' cotton,  
O Julie!  
Pick a bale a day.

Me an' my wife can  
Pick a bale o' cotton,  
Me an' my wife can  
Pick a bale a day.

Ol' lady can  
Pick a bale o' cotton,  
Ol' lady can  
Pick a bale a day.

Me an' my brother can  
Pick a bale o' cotton,  
Me an' my brother can  
Pick a bale a day.

Looky, looky yonder,  
Pick a bale o' cotton;  
Pick a bale a day.

O Julie!  
Pick a bale o' cotton,  
O Julie!  
Pick a bale a day.

\* Sometimes Lead Belly sings the chorus after each stanza; sometimes he doesn't.

### ELNORA

Like Julie Ann Johnson, Elnora is a name with a pretty sound to it. Also like Julie Ann Johnson, the men sang about Elnora in the Texas penitentiary while Lead Belly spent his years there. "Elnora" with a few "Lawd-Lawd's" made a fine song for cutting wood or flat-weeding.\*

When he came to Austin, Lead Belly discovered that our cook was named Elnora, too. Having learned from his "Governor O. K. Allen" that if a singer mentions the names of his audience in his song they are likely to be quite pleased, he composed the following song, adding the names of the various members of our family as he met them.

Like so many of his songs, "Elnora" had just the effect that Lead Belly intended it to have. He knew that it would flatter "Mister John A. Lomack" to have the details of his household mentioned, one by one, so that it would seem quite extensive, and that "Mister Alan Lomack" would be greatly tickled at being called "Little boss-man." He was well aware that simply by singing to a fine tune the name of each member of the family and the street and number of our house in Austin, he could make home seem much nearer to two travel-weary Texans.

\* As in most ax-songs, the ax falls at the end of each line.

## Negro Folk Songs

J=88-108

El - no - ra, O Lawd, Lawd,  
El - no - ra, O Lawd,

She's liv - in' in Aus - tin, O Lawd,

She lives in Aus - tin, O Lawd.

7th stanza: Mis - ter Al - an Lo - mack,  
Mis - ter Al - an Lo - mack,

Var. 1.

\* A broken bar line indicates a tentative division.

*Chorus:*

Elnora,  
O Lawd, Lawd,  
Elnora,  
O Lawd,

She's livin' in Austin,  
O Lawd,  
She lives in Austin,  
O Lawd.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

Workin' for her boss-man,\*  
Mister John A. Lomack;  
Workin' for her mistis,  
Miss Terrill Lomack;  
Her little boss-man,  
Mister Alan Lomack;  
Her little mistis,  
Miss Bess Brown, suh;  
Her third boss-man,  
Mister John A. Junior;  
On Thirty-fourth Street,  
In de four hund'ed block, suh;  
Mus' be in Austin,  
In Austin, Texas.

*Chorus:*

Elnora,  
O Lawd, Lawd,  
Elnora,  
O Lawd.

## JULIE ANN JOHNSON

When Lead Belly was in the Texas "pen," he used to think a lot about a woman of his, named Julie Ann Johnson. He began to sing about her when his "ax was walkin' an' de chipes was a-talkin'," and

\* Each verse is expanded into a four-line stanza as above. Chorus sung whenever one feels inclined.

## Negro Folk Songs

the song became his personal work song. At night, entertaining guards and visitors with his guitar, Lead Belly sang "Julie Ann Johnson" in fast time suitable for dancing. The song fitted his voice, and it became a favorite with him, especially when he was playing for white folks.

When we visited him in 1933 on the Louisiana State Penal Farm at Angola, he sang us "Julie Ann Johnson." We recorded it and put it into "American Ballads and Folk-Songs." In that version there is no mention of Martha, his present wife.

But 1935 was, as Lead Belly says, "a bran-new year, an' we oughta say, 'Looky here.'" In 1935, with Martha coming from Shreveport to New York to marry him, Lead Belly sang the following version:

*Skipping*  
♩=88-104



Miss Ju - lie Ann John - son, O Lawd!  
Miss Ju - lie Ann John - son, O - ho!  
Good - by, Ju - lie, O Lawd!  
Good - by, Ju - lie, O - ho!

Miss Julie Ann Johnson,  
O Lawd!  
Miss Julie Ann Johnson,  
Oho!

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

I'm gonna leave you,  
O Lawd!  
I'm gonna leave you,  
Oho!

Gonna marry Marthy,  
Po' girl,\*  
Gonna marry Marthy,  
Po' girl.

Um-umm-um, †  
Um-um,  
Um-umm-um,  
Um-um.

And by March, married to Martha, he was singing:

Done got married,  
O Lawd!  
Done got married,  
Oho!

Done married Marthy,  
Po' girl;  
Done married Marthy,  
Po' girl.

Was Marthy Promise,  
O Lawd!  
Was Marthy Promise,  
Oho!

\* This refrain has no significance for Lead Belly. It is part of the American ballad tradition in which "Po" Boy is one of the most important ballads.  
† A moan.

## Negro Folk Songs

---

Is Ledbetter now, suh,  
O Lawd!  
Is Ledbetter now, suh,  
Oho!

Good-by, Julie,  
O Lawd!  
Good-by, Julie,  
Po' girl.

Miss Julie Ann Johnson,  
Po' girl; \*  
Miss Julie Ann Johnson,  
Po' girl.

Um-um-um,  
Um-um,  
Um-um-um,  
Um-um.

### LOOKY YONDER, WHERE DE SUN DONE GONE

His uncle, Terrell Ledbetter, used to sing this work song as he chopped cotton. Lead Belly took it to prison with him and "buck-jumped" † to the music of it.

\* Here convention and Lead Belly have all unconsciously hit off a meaningful stanza. Lead Belly has left Julie Ann for Martha.

† Covering the grass and weeds on the cotton rows with dirt, instead of chopping up each sprout—this is "buck-jumping." It saves the cotton-chopper a great amount of time and energy.

As Sung by Lead Belly

---

*d=80-116*

1.

Look - y, look - y yon - der, Look - y, look - y yon - der,

1.

Look - y, look - y yon - der, Where de sun done gone.

I cain' hold 'em, I cain' hold 'em,

I cain' hold 'em, No - o way I do.

Shake 'em, shake e'm, Aw, break 'em,

break 'em, Aw, shake 'em, shake 'em,

Aw, break 'em, break 'em,

*Var. 1.*

2.

3.

## Negro Folk Songs

---

### *Chorus:*

Looky, looky yonder,  
Looky, looky yonder,  
Looky, looky yonder,  
Where de sun done gone.

I cain' hold 'em,\*  
I cain' hold 'em,  
I cain' hold 'em,  
No way I do.

Nigger lick 'lasses,  
Nigger lick 'lasses,  
Nigger lick 'lasses,  
An' de white folks licks 'em, too.

Ada got a gold mine,  
Ada got a gold mine,  
Ada got a gold mine,  
Way above her knee.

I wonder what's de matter,  
I wonder what's de matter,  
I wonder what's de matter,  
Wid dat two-nineteen.†

Ol' Aunt Dinah,  
Ol' Aunt Dinah,  
Ol' Aunt Dinah,  
Got behind de sun.

\* "Hold 'em" = stick it out.

† A Negro man in the field near a railroad tells time by the trains that pass. The hot afternoon drags slowly on, and he's sure it is three o'clock anyway; yet the 2:19 train has not come.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

Aw, shake 'em, shake 'em,\*  
Aw, break 'em, break 'em,  
Aw, shake 'em, shake 'em,  
Aw, break 'em, break 'em.  
Aw, shake 'em, shake 'em,  
Aw, Ca'line, Ca'line, Ca'line.  
Ca'line, Ca'line, Ca'line,  
Ca'line, Ca'line, Ca'line,  
Ca'line, Ca'line, Ca'line,  
Where de sun done gone.

De boys like Becky,  
De boys like Becky,  
De boys like Becky,  
But they don't like Vi.

'Cause Becky got something,  
'Cause Becky got something,  
'Cause Becky got something,  
All de boys can buy.

Looky, looky yonder,  
Looky, looky yonder,  
Looky, looky yonder,  
Where de sun done gone.

## BILLY IN DE LOWLANDS

Lead Belly's favorite work song after "Julie Ann Johnson" (they both are similar and typical of the simple, rhythmic work song melodies of the Texas prison farms), is "Billy in de Lowlands." The

\* In this stanza he seems to get his second wind. The fifth and sixth lines are sung as the couplets just above. Then in the last four lines Lead Belly swings back into the regular melody.

## Negro Folk Songs

leader, as usual, gives out the verse, at the end of which all the axes, or picks, fall together. The gang comes in with the "O Lawd, Lawd, Lawd," just as the force of the stroke is exhausted, and the axes fall again with the last syllable. The leader begins the repetition of the verse, finishes it with the help of the gang, and the axes fall again. The gang completes the stanza with an "O Lawd," and the axes drop again. With each ax-stroke there is a violent exhalation of breath. Every line in the text is repeated and sung as the first stanza below.

*Rather slow*  
♩ = 84-120

Bil - ly in de low - lands, O Lawd, Lawd, Lawd,  
Bil - ly in de low - lands, O Lawd!  
On de log, suh, O Lawd, Lawd, Lawd,  
On de log, suh, O Lawd.

Billy in de lowlands,  
O Lawd, Lawd, Lawd;  
Billy in de lowlands,  
O Lawd!

On de log, suh;

He's a sundown ma-han; \*

\* A "sundown man" can keep working and not slow down.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

He's a number-one ma-han,\*

Doin' his time, suh,

Looky—looky yonder.

Yonder come de captain,

Captain Flanagan, †

He's a rider.

Gonna tell de captain,

What's de matter wid Billy;

He won' work, suh.

Po' Billy got fevo, ‡

Hund'ed an' nine, suh,

Billy in de lowlands,

And on and on monotonously, dispiritedly, repetitiously.

## OL' RATTLER

We have been told repeatedly by various Negro convicts on Texas prison farms that they could outrun any dog or horse on the place, that they could leave the farm any hot day they took the notion. A certain amount of truth is there. The convicts, who work all day

\* An extra good worker.

† The captain in charge of the most extensive prison farm in Texas, the Central State Farm at Sugar Land. The Negro convicts all respect him and like him and try to get placed with him. They regard him as a fine, strong, fair, and generous man, as lenient as is possible under the conditions. We must add that to us he has been always kind and courteous and helpful.

‡ Fever; malaria, perhaps, or the condition leading to sunstroke, "where a man can't sweat."

## Negro Folk Songs

every day under the broiling sun, driven by the guards, are in wonderful physical condition. The dogs, a breed of English fox-hounds, lie up in their pens most of the time; while the horses, big-boned and clumsy, walk all day behind the men in the field and have no other exercise.

Thus, if the fleeing prisoner gets out of gun range, keeps his nerve with the thunder of hoofs and the baying of the hounds in his ears, and lays a careful and intricate trail through the river bottoms, he may get away. In the terrifying wet heat of the river lowlands, the dogs and horses will weary before the convict does. That more men are not lost on the prison farms is due to the efficiency of the guards, the fear of the convicts that if they are caught (and most of them are, sooner or later) they will lose their small privileges and their "good time," and the fact that there are few men with the courage to make a break-away from a cocked shotgun.

Riley was one of the exceptions to this rule. He outran old Rattler and his pack, he winded the horses that were following, "walked the Brazos River like Christ," and was never heard of again. He left Rattler on the bank "a-howlin'." Rattler, probably named after a fast train, like his Louisiana cousin, Red Ball, is the prototype of all good coon, possum and "nigger" dogs in the deep South. He figures in numerous songs. This work song should be sung with gusto, with shouts, with swift breath, as if the singer were participating in the man-hunt or watching it, or were himself fleeing through the bottom with the dogs on his trail. We should like to say definitely, but we cannot be sure, that this song dates back to the reconstruction period after the Civil War and is a sort of stepcousin to "Run, Nigger, Run!"

$\text{d}=92-120$

$\frac{2}{2}$

Ol' Rat-tl - ler was a hunt - in' dog,

Here, Ratt - ler, here, Ol' Ratt - ler was a hunt-in' dog,

## As Sung by Lead Belly

Chorus:



Here, Rat - tl - ler,



Here, Ratt - ler,

*Variant for stanzas 5 and 10*



Too,

Too,

Ol' Rattler was a huntin' dog,

Here, Rattler, here!

Ol' Rattler was a huntin' dog,

Here, Rattler, here!

*Chorus: \**

Here, Rattler,

Here, Rattler, here!

Here, Rattler,

Here, Rattler, here!

Ol' Rattler, he's a nigger dog; †

Go find Rattler.

Doncha hear me blow my horn?

Too-too—

Ol' Riley's done gone,

Ketch that nigger, ketch that nigger,

\* The chorus comes as one likes—so Lead Belly.

† Each of the following verses is expanded into four lines as in the beginning stanza.

## Negro Folk Songs

---

Ol' Rattler's got de trail an' gone,  
Ol' Rattler he's a-barkin',  
You—you, woo-oo-oo,\*  
Ol' Rattler was a-runnin',  
Ol' Riley run from sun to sun, †  
Ol' Rattler's in de bottom,  
What's de matter wid Rattler, he won' run?  
Too hot in de summer time,  
Ol' Riley los' ol' Rattler,  
Riley walked the water,  
Ol' Rattler couldn't walk it.  
Bye, bye, Rattler.

### SPOKEN:

That's one time ol' Rattler got lef', sho 'nough!

## DE GREY GOOSE

This delightful ballad is current, so far as we know, only on the Texas prison farms, where the Negro convicts use it as a work song. Since it fits so well with the folk-tradition of slavery days, we do not believe that it is of prison origin. More probably this ballad has been preserved by the last surviving institution to work Negroes in large gangs—the state prison farm—whereas it was first sung by Negro slaves.

The existence of two other Texas songs gives some support to this guess. The first of these is a spiritual in simple ballad form that tells the story of Noah and the flood, also used as a work song by Texas Negro convicts. The air is a closely connected variant of "De Grey Goose."

\* The baying of a hound on the trail.

† That is, all day long.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

God tol' Norah,  
O Mount Zion,  
Gonna be a flood, Lawd,  
O Mount Zion.

There is a ballad with a much more primitive air and with the same refrain:

George went a-huntin',  
O Mount Zion!  
He kill an eagle,  
O Mount Zion! \*

*J=112-152*

Pre-a - cher went a - hun - tin', Lawd, Lawd, Lawd,

Pre-a - cher went a - hun - tin', Lawd, Lawd, Lawd.

Car-ried 'long his shot - gun, Lawd, Lawd, Lawd,

Car - ried 'long his shot - gun, Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!

10th and 16th stanza

Great God! Great God! Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!

Great God! Great God! Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!

Var. 1.

Var. 2.

\* "Some Negro Folk-Songs of Texas," by Mary Virginia Bales, *Journal of the Texas Folk-Lore Society*, Vol. VII, pp. 85-112.

## Negro Folk Songs

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Preacher went a-huntin',  
Lawd, Lawd, Lawd;  
Preacher went a-huntin',  
Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!

Carried 'long his shotgun,\*  
'Long came a grey goose,  
Gun went "a-boo-loo!"  
Down came a grey goose,  
He was six weeks a-fallin',  
Then they give a feather-pickin',  
Yo' wife an' my wife,  
They was six weeks a-pickin',  
Great God! Great God!  
Well, I wonder what's de matter,  
So dey put him on to parboil,  
He was six weeks a-boilin',  
So dey put him on de table,  
Fork couldn't stick him,  
Knife couldn't cut him,  
Great God, it's a grey goose!  
So dey taken him to de hogpen,  
Broke the sow's teeth out,  
Great God, it's a grey goose,

\* Each line to be repeated as in first stanza.

**HOLLERS**

## HOLLERS

The cowboys "hollered" at their cattle to keep them moving or to quiet them at night; lumberjacks, to let the world know another big tree was coming down; field hands, to relieve the loneliness of their plowing. This habit of hollering, characteristic of the solitary laborer, has particularly marked the American Negro at work. On the levee, in the cotton field, on the railroad, he has hollered and moaned his troubles and his observations on the ways of the world. When he found the piano and the guitar, which could holler or moan and talk drum talk at the same time, the blues came into being. The holler is a way of singing—free, gliding from a sustained high note down to the lowest register the singer can reach, often ending there in a grunt. It is marked by spontaneous and unpredictable changes in rhythm.

The first blues (possibly) were hollers with a drum rhythm, limited somewhat by the regular repetitions necessary for dancing. They still show evidences of their origin. The purveyors of records to the southern Negro market are always urging their singers "to put in a few hollers": they are unconsciously realizing the original stuff of the blues. Thus it comes about that a Negro convict may be hollering the latest synthesized blues from Broadway. The next moment, however, he may shift over into a tune that New York City and the East have never touched.

The holler may develop, under the restrictions of group singing, into a work song like "Go Down, Ol' Hannah"; but similar songs, current among long-time men, are still essentially solo; they retain their original freedom and indicate the origin of the others. In the following group of songs, where one can find the roots of the American Negro's contribution to music, "Ain' Goin' Down to the Well No Mo'" is alone typical of the "pure" holler.

## Negro Folk Songs

### HODAY, HODAY, HODAY

#### A "WHOOP" \*

Walking to school, picking cotton in the cool of the morning, coming home in company at night from a dance, anywhere out in the open where there was a good echo, a young Negro boy from around Mooringsport, with the sap running in him, might holler this old "holler."

*Ringing  
♩ = 56, quite free*

The musical notation consists of four staves of music in common time (♩ = 56) and 6/8 time. The first staff starts with a treble clef, the second with a bass clef, the third with a treble clef, and the fourth with a bass clef. The lyrics are: (Ho-day, ho-day,) ho-day, - da-y - y - da-y - y.

\* The strange birdlike cries and calls with which little boys, white and Negro, signal each other and feed their imaginations. Lead Belly has brought his "whoop" into conventional limits. In thinly settled communities of the wooded frontiers "hollers" for certain definite signals were practiced also by grown-ups.

\*\* Almost every ♩ and ♩. is sung actually as: and:

As Sung by Lead Belly



Ho-day, ho - day, ho-day,      Ho-day, ho - day, ho-day,



Ho-day, ho - day, ho-day,      Ho-day, ho - day, ho-day.

Hoday, hoday, hoday,  
Hoday, hoday, hoday,  
Hoday, hoday, hoday,  
Hoday, hoday, hoday . . .

And so forth and so forth.

ONE DOLLAR BILL, BABY

A BLUES HOLLER

Lead Belly and his friends used to holler it on their way to school.



One dol - lar bill, ba - by, won' buy you no shoes,



One dol - lar bill, ba - by, won' buy you no shoes,



Dol - lar bill, ba - by, won' buy you no shoes.

\* At both places *b* alternates with *c*.

## Negro Folk Songs

One dollar bill, baby, won' buy you no shoes,  
One dollar bill, baby, won' buy you no shoes,  
One dollar bill, baby, won' buy you no shoes.

One dollar bill, baby, won' he-e'p you none.  
One dollar bill, baby won' he-e'p you none.  
One dollar bill, baby, won' buy you no home.

### DICKLICKER'S HOLLER

#### A JAIL-HOUSE HOLLER

"Dicklicker was an' ol' nigger I was in jail with in Texas. Don' know where he come f'm or what become of him, but that nigger could sing. We'd be lyin' up in de bullpen,\* an' Dicklicker would holler this ol' song. He didn' care, nawsuh, he didn' care about nothin' an' nobody. Settin' there in jail, he jus' kep' a-holl'in' this ol' song." The melody is of white origin, adapted to the Negro manner; the holler is a jail-house blues and no mistake—the jail house, where the figures of women walk through the thoughts of the men by day and by night.

*Too mournfully*  
 $\text{♩} = 104, \text{ free}$

I been down here roll - in' - n  
For wi - hite man so lo - ho - ng,

\* Room opening into the various cells.

As Sung by Lead Belly

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The musical notation consists of two staves. The first staff starts with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp, and a common time signature. It contains six measures of music with lyrics: "An' I'm a poor ol' boy - y". The second staff continues with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp, and a common time signature. It contains five measures of music with lyrics: "An' (a) great long ways from home." The notation includes various note heads, stems, and rests.

I been down here rollin' for white man so long—  
I'm a poor ol' boy an' a great long ways f'om home.

But some day or 'nother I'll be done worryin' here,  
I'll be somewhere, some gal will feel my care.

I'm go'n' tell you somepin', I swear, gal, I declare,  
I'm gonna tell the worl', there mus' be a God somewhere.

'Cause when I lef' you, woman, I lef' you col' in han',\*  
Was gonna be gone so long, I'se afraid you'd get a bran-new man.

If I had a-listened to my first an' second wives,  
I would not 'a' been here, lovin' this hard ol' i'on. †

I had a black woman—she was tree-top tall,  
An' I believed to my soul that she knowed it all,

An' I taken that woman, taken her to be my frien'.  
Jes' look what a hole she done throwed me in.

An' I can't get a letter an' she won' send no word,  
An' I believe to my soul I got to leave this worl'.

I say, sweet mamma, I hate to see you cry,  
But you know your man, baby, was born to die.

\* "Money makes de pa'm ob de han' warm."

† An extreme vowel rhyme. The convict hangs on the iron bars.

## Negro Folk Songs

---

With all this trouble I have been gone so jumpin' long,  
Till I thought, baby, I never would get back home;

It was soon one morning, I could not lay back down,\*  
I was lookin' right at her, was standin' in her mornin' gown.

Ain' nobody know but de good Lawd an' me  
When a man get in trouble, all de troubles he see.

### GO DOWN, OL' HANNAH †

#### A WORK HOLLER

"If the world is gonna be as hot and hellish tomorrow as it is today," cries the weary, sweating Negro convict, "go down, ol' Sun, an' don' rise no more till Judgment Day." This mournful field song of the Texas prison system drags on like one of "dem long, hot summer days" in July and August when "'bout three o'clock in de evenin' de sun jes' stops an' won' move on." The text speaks tersely of the tragedy of 1910, when convicts were dying of sunstroke or from buckshot wounds as they made desperate breaks away from misery too great for them to bear.

Lead Belly, who was never bothered by the heat or the hard work, has injected his personality into the song,

Number one leader, I was rollin' some,  
I wuz rollin', baby, from sun to sun.

He sings only the leader's part of a song that is nearly always sung by a leader and a group, and his melody is different from that current nowadays in the Texas prison camps. Each line is repeated a varying number of times.

\* Go back to sleep.

† The sun.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

*J=108, free*

Go down, ol' Han - nah, um - m - m,  
don - cha rise no mo'.  
Go down, ol' Han - nah - - o,  
don - cha rise no mo'.

Go down, ol' Hannah, doncha rise no mo',  
Go down, ol' Hannah, doncha rise no mo';  
Ef you rise in de mornin', bring Jedgment Day.

You oughta been on de Brazis \* in nineteen and ten;  
Dey was workin' de women, like dey drove de men.

You oughta been here in nineteen an' ten,  
The mens was fallin'—a reg'lar haulin' in,

The sun was shinin', the mens was flyin',  
The cap'n was holl'in', we wuz almos' dyin',

Number one leader, I was rollin' some, †  
I was rollin', honey, from sun to sun.

\* The Brazos, Texas' longest river.

† "Rollin'" is the equivalent of "working" and is descriptive of the easy motion of a good worker as he hoes or plows down a long row.

As Sung by Lead Belly



Ho-day, ho - day, ho-day,      Ho-day, ho - day, ho-day,



Ho-day, ho - day, ho-day,      Ho-day, ho - day, ho-day.

Hoday, hoday, hoday,  
Hoday, hoday, hoday,  
Hoday, hoday, hoday,  
Hoday, hoday, hoday . . .

And so forth and so forth.

ONE DOLLAR BILL, BABY

A BLUES HOLLER

Lead Belly and his friends used to holler it on their way to school.



One dol - lar bill, ba - by, won' buy you no shoes,



One dol - lar bill, ba - by, won' buy you no shoes,



Dol - lar bill, ba - by, won' buy you no shoes.

\* At both places *b* alternates with *c*.

## Negro Folk Songs

One dollar bill, baby, won' buy you no shoes,  
One dollar bill, baby, won' buy you no shoes,  
One dollar bill, baby, won' buy you no shoes.

One dollar bill, baby, won' he-e'p you none.  
One dollar bill, baby won' he-e'p you none.  
One dollar bill, baby, won' buy you no home.

### DICKLICKER'S HOLLER

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*Too mournfully*  
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I been down here roll - in' - n  
For wi - hite man so lo - ho - ng,

\* Room opening into the various cells.

As Sung by Lead Belly

---

The musical notation consists of two staves in G major. The first staff contains the lyrics "An' I'm a poor ol' boy - y'" with corresponding musical notes. The second staff contains the lyrics "An' (a) great long ways from home." with corresponding musical notes.

I been down here rollin' for white man so long—  
I'm a poor ol' boy an' a great long ways f'om home.

But some day or 'nother I'll be done worryin' here,  
I'll be somewhere, some gal will feel my care.

I'm go'n' tell you somepin', I swear, gal, I declare,  
I'm gonna tell the worl', there mus' be a God somewhere.

'Cause when I lef' you, woman, I lef' you col' in han',\*  
Was gonna be gone so long, I'se afraid you'd get a bran-new man.

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I would not 'a' been here, lovin' this hard ol' i'on. †

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An' I believed to my soul that she knowed it all,

An' I taken that woman, taken her to be my frien'.  
Jes' look what a hole she done throwed me in.

An' I can't get a letter an' she won' send no word,  
An' I believe to my soul I got to leave this worl'.

I say, sweet mamma, I hate to see you cry,  
But you know your man, baby, was born to die.

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† An extreme vowel rhyme. The convict hangs on the iron bars.

## Negro Folk Songs

---

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Till I thought, baby, I never would get back home;

It was soon one morning, I could not lay back down,\*  
I was lookin' right at her, was standin' in her mornin' gown.

Ain' nobody know but de good Lawd an' me  
When a man get in trouble, all de troubles he see.

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I wuz rollin', baby, from sun to sun.

He sings only the leader's part of a song that is nearly always sung by a leader and a group, and his melody is different from that current nowadays in the Texas prison camps. Each line is repeated a varying number of times.

\* Go back to sleep.

† The sun.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

*J=108, free*

Go down, ol' Han-nah, um - m - m,  
don - cha rise no mo'.

Go down, ol' Han-nah - - - o,  
don - cha rise no mo'.

Go down, ol' Hannah, doncha rise no mo',  
Go down, ol' Hannah, doncha rise no mo';  
Ef you rise in de mornin', bring Jedgment Day.

You oughta been on de Brazis \* in nineteen and ten;  
Dey was workin' de women, like dey drove de men.

You oughta been here in nineteen an' ten,  
The mens was fallin'—a reg'lar haulin' in,

The sun was shinin', the mens was flyin',  
The cap'n was holl'in', we wuz almos' dyin',

Number one leader, I was rollin' some, †  
I was rollin', honey, from sun to sun.

\* The Brazos, Texas' longest river.

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## Negro Folk Songs

---

Moon in de mornin', 'fo' de sun did rise;  
I would think about my baby, hang my head an' cry.  
Oh, de man on de end \* holl'in', "Bring 'em, bring 'em on here." †

Ef a man don' know, ef a man don' know—  
It's a man lyin' dead on de low turn row. ‡

Long-time man, hold up your head,  
You may make it, an' you may fall dead.

Go down, ol' Hannah, don' you rise no mo',  
Ef you rise in de mornin', bring Jedgment Day.  
Ef you rise in de mornin', bring Jedgment Day.

### IN DEM LONG HOT SUMMER DAYS

#### A WORK HOLLER

The Brazos was "boiling." It had flooded its banks and was become a little Mississippi, full of suck-holes and whirlpools and floating logs. During the rise, on one of these hot days, when the sun was broiling, the men were falling out, and the "pool-doos § were dancin'," old Riley got to thinking about his happy home. He got to thinking about his woman and about his great, long time. He got "worried," as the convicts say.

So Riley left, with the guards and the dogs, "nigger-eatin' Rattler" at the head of the pack, after him. They trailed him to the

\* The assistant captain, who oversees all the gangs in the fields. If the work isn't going fast enough, "He'll get off his horse an' walk across de fiel's an' whip 'em, gang by gang. He'll tighten 'em up, ef dey ain' tight like that. He'll give mos' men jus' five or six good licks, but ef one is way late he'll throw him down an' pull down his britches. But ef you is a real good worker, he ain' gonna bother you, ain' gonna touch you 'tall."

† Prison lingo, meaning "hurry up, tighten up."

‡ A cleared space, several rows wide, running across a field at right angles to the other rows, where the plow teams can turn without trampling or uprooting the cotton, cane, or corn.

§ Heat vibrations.

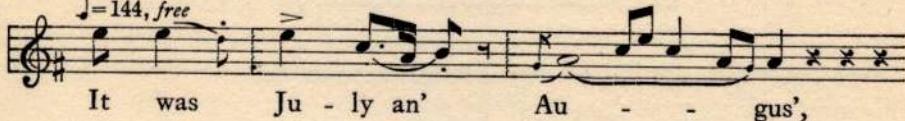
## As Sung by Lead Belly

Brazos, saw his footprints vanish at the water's edge. The guards had wheeled their horses, when old Rattler, pointing his long wise old nose across the red water, began to howl. The guards turned and stared. On the other bank they saw old Riley, his convict stripes ripped to shreds, standing among the willows silently watching them. Suddenly he shouted derisively, "Bye-bye, penitenshuh," and disappeared in the thicket. He must have kept running, for they never brought him back to serve out his time in the Texas penitentiary.

We have never talked to a convict who claimed to have seen Riley. Perhaps his is the story of some great slave escape, taken over by the convicts and dressed in stripes. Anyhow, when the Negro convict gangs sing about old Riley, the guards loosen their six-shooters in their scabbards and rub their sun-wearied eyes.

*Long drawn out and powerful*

$J=144, free$



It was July an' Augus',  
It was July an' Augus',  
They was long, hot summer days,

When ol' Riley taken a notion,  
Ol' Riley taken a notion,  
In dem long, hot summer days;

## Negro Folk Songs

---

Taken a notion to walk de water,  
Taken a notion to walk de water,  
In dem long, hot summer days.

Ol' Riley was a-leavin',  
Ol' Riley was a-leavin',  
In dem long, hot summer days.

Ol' Rattler come a-rollin',  
Ol' Rattler come a-rollin',  
In dem long, hot summer days.

Ol' Rattler went out a-rovin',  
Ol' Rattler went out a-rovin',  
In dem long, hot summer days.

Ol' Rattler couldn't trail him,  
Ol' Rattler couldn't trail him,  
In dem long, hot summer days.

He was a-barkin', "Hoo-oo-oo-oo,"  
He was a-barkin', "Hoo-oo-oo-oo,"  
In dem long, hot summer days.

Ol' Riley walked de water,  
Ol' Riley walked de water,  
In dem long, hot summer days.

Ol' Riley, farewell,  
Ol' Riley, farewell,  
In dem long, hot summer days.

AIN' GOIN' DOWN TO DE WELL NO MO'

A WORK HOLLER

"Learned this song on a cotton pick in Rockwall County from ol' Will Darlin'. Must 'a' been about 1910. Was on Gus Edwards' farm where niggers would be pickin' thirty bales of cotton a day. At daylight, when you get so you can jes' see to pick, you gonna fin' me standin' out there in de fiel'. An' I can snatch eight or nine hund'ed pounds a day—when I want to. An' when I get ready, I can pick a thousand.\* You can ask any those folks in Rockwall County about Ledbetter, what I mean, ol' Huddie Ledbetter, an' they gonna tell you, 'That's *one* cotton-pickin' nigger.' Used to be my wife Lethe's song. We'd be down in de fiel'—she was a li'l', low woman, but, Godamighty, she could pick cotton!—an' she'd ask me to sing this ol' song. I'd raise it up right sweet, an' we'd pick cotton till you couldn't hear nothin' but de bolls rattlin'."

"Ain' Gwine Down to de Well No Mo'" (the "well" is the "jail house" or "penitenshuh") is a field holler, typical of the loveliest of Negro folk songs—a pre-blues, pre-jazz, perhaps even a pre-spiritual type. The singer can adapt the melody to anything he wants to say, or he can "moan" his way through.

Lead Belly, who usually has little respect for any tune that he can't help out with his twelve strings, has never attempted to accompany this song on his guitar. He is most likely to moan it when he is entirely occupied and alone with work of some kind; and the "holler" will adapt itself, at such times, to his thoughts. For example, late one evening, not many days before Christmas, at the end of a hard day's drive, Lead Belly was still at the wheel, the car moving on between Raleigh and Richmond. Nothing had been said for miles. We were all weary and cold. Lead Belly began to moan under his breath:

\* No man alive or dead ever picked a thousand pounds of clean cotton in a day with his two hands.

## Negro Folk Songs

"Oho-o, baby,  
Christmas comin',  
Christmas comin', Christmas comin',  
Oho-o-o-o . . .  
I'm a long ways from home, long ways from home,  
O Marthy, long ways from you."

And so on, informing his soul how cold it was, how lonesome this strange country was, and how hard it was on a man not to be home at Christmas time.

Again, in New York, he was washing dishes, alone in the kitchen, filling the whole apartment with his resolve not to go down "to de well no mo'." The telephone rang. As I hurried to answer, I heard Lead Belly shout,

"Telephone's a-ringin',  
Telephone's a-ringin', ringin',  
Oho-o-o-o . . .  
An' de peoples is a-singin',  
Great God, a-singin'."

*J=72, very free and emphatic*

Oh, ba - by, Oh, black gal,  
Oh, black gal, black gal, Ain' gwine down,  
ain' gwine down To de well no mo'.

As Sung by Lead Belly

If I gets a - - ble,  
If I gets a - - ble - - l, a - ble,  
To pay dis debt I owe, debt  
I owe — — — — —, I ain' gwine down,  
ain' gwine down To de well no mo'.

Oh, baby,  
Oh, black gal,  
Lawd, down in de bottom—  
Mud up to my knees, mud up to my knees,  
Oh, de man,\* he was so hard to please.

*Chorus:*

Oh, baby,  
Oh, black gal,  
Oh, black gal, black gal,

\* The captain, or assistant captain, of a prison farm.

## Negro Folk Songs

---

Ain' gwine down, ain' gwine down  
To de well no mo'.

If I gets able,  
If I gets able, able—  
To pay dis debt I owe, debt I owe—  
I ain' gwine down, ain' gwine down  
To de well no mo'.

Something's funny—  
O Lawd, Lawd, Lawd,  
I couldn't understand, couldn't understand,  
Oh, couldn't understand.

Got me charged wid murder,—  
Got me charged wid murder, murder,  
O Lawd, I ain' raised my han',  
Ain' raised my han', ain' raised my han',  
Oh, ain' raised my han'.

Oh, black gal,  
Oh, black gal,  
Oho-o-o-o,  
Turn me loose, turn me loose,  
Please, mamma, won' you turn me loose?

Lawd, I was on de outside,  
I was on de outside, lookin' in.  
Oho-o-o-o,  
Lookin' in, lookin' in,  
Oh, black woman, I was lookin' in.

Now, I'm on de inside,  
Now I'm on de inside, inside,

As Sung by Lead Belly

---

Oho-o-o-o,  
Ain' got no frien's, ain' got no frien's,  
Great God, ain' got no frien's.

Oh, Mamie,  
Tell Katie,  
Oho-o-o-o,  
Come home to de baby,  
To de baby, to de baby,  
Black gal, to de baby.

Oh, baby,  
Oh, black gal,  
Oh, black gal, black gal,  
Ain' gwine down, ain' gwine down  
To de well no mo'.

**THE BLUES**

## I'M ALL OUT AND DOWN

On one occasion Lead Belly said that he had learned this levee song from a little boy "who couldn't get in de house an' get set down 'fo' he'd 'gin to holler this old song." On another occasion he maintained that he had picked it up from a group of levee-camp workers who had stopped overnight at his father's place. At any rate, under his agile fingers "I'm All Out and Down" has become a genuine barrelhouse two-step.\* Lead Belly says there are women around Mooringsport who begin to wiggle as soon as he picks the first notes.

We believe that the story of this tune's development from holler to blues is typical of many, if not all, of the folk blues.

J=120-160, *free*

Hon-na - a - ay, I'm all out an'down,

In strict time

Hon - a - a - ay, I'm broke, babe,

an' I ain' got a dime, Ev - 'y good

man gets in ha'd luck some-time.

\* For a somewhat dispirited but still interesting rendition of "I'm All Out an' Down," see Melotone Record M13326-A.

## Negro Folk Songs

Don' dey, ba - by?  
Don' dey,  
ba - by?  
Don' dey, ba - by?  
Spoken:  
Dis man was a long ways f'om home,  
an' he got a brown - skin wo - man.  
An' he know pay - day's com - in' pret - ty soon,  
an' de wo - man is shout - in' 'cause it's mos' pay - day.  
An' de ol' mules is hon - gry      an' de sun is go - in' down.

*strict time, spoken*

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

*Spoken:*

De man wish pay-day would move off a li - 'l fur-ther,  
so he wouldn't have to pay dat wo - man no - thin'.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Hon-a-a-ay,\*  
I'm all out an' down.  
Hon-a-a-ay,  
I'm broke, babe, an' I ain' got a dime,  
Ev'y good man gets in ha'd luck sometime,  
Don' dey, baby?  
Don' dey, baby?  
Don' dey, baby?  
Don' dey, baby?

Aw, de women on de levee, honey, holl'in', "Whoa, haw, gee."  
De mens on de levee holl'in', "Doncha murder me." †  
Please, baby,  
Please, baby,  
Don' murder,  
Don' murder.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Dis man was a long ways from home, an' he got a brown-skin woman. An' he know pay-day's comin' pretty soon, an' de woman is shoutin' 'cause it's most pay-day. An' de ol' mules is hongry an'

\* Honey.

† The levee camp in its heyday was a dangerous place with no other law than that of the white contractor's six-shooter.

## Negro Folk Songs

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de sun is goin' down. De man wish pay-day would move off a li'l further, so he wouldn' have to pay dat woman nothin'. He look way back an' he 'gin to blow his horn:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Hon-a-a-ay,  
I'm all out and down.  
Hon-a-a-ay,  
Oh, de mules an' de hosses nicklin' for dey corn and hay,  
Women on de levee shoutin' 'cause it's mos' pay-day,  
Cryin', "Daddy,"  
Cryin', "Daddy,"  
Sweet Daddy,  
Sweet Daddy."

Gwine tell my woman like de Dago tol' de Jew,  
"You don' want me, honey, I don' want you.  
Tell me, baby,  
Tell me, baby."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

I swear to God I know that man wish that woman wouldn' come home when pay-day come. He looks aroun' an' he 'gin to cry:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Hon-a-a-ay,  
What you wan' me to do?  
Hon-a-a-ay,  
Brown-skin woman keep you worried all de time,  
Brown-skin woman make a moon-eyed \* man go blin',  
Won' dey, baby?  
Won' dey, baby?

\* shortsighted.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

Yellow woman make a preacher lay his Bible down,  
Jut-black woman make a jack-rabbit hug a houn',  
Tell me, baby,  
Tell me, baby.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

This man was workin' on de levee for Mr. John Ryan.\* An' he was one of de bes' skinners † Mr. Ryan had. An' Mr. Ryan done made de man mad. An' 'stead of takin' it out on Mr. Ryan, dis man was takin' his spite out of de mules. He was a man expert wid his lines. Ev'ry time he hit a mule, he cut de hair right off an' write his 'nitals on de mule's hide. ‡

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Hon-a-a-ay,  
I'm all out an' down,  
Hon-a-a-ay,  
I'm down in de bottom, skinnin' for Johnny Ryan,  
Puttin' my 'nitals, honey, on de mules' behin'  
Wid my line, babe,  
Wid my line, babe.

I tol' my baby like de Dago tol' de Jew,  
Be good to me, an' I'll be good to you.  
Tell me, baby,  
Tell me, baby,  
Aw, baby,  
Aw, baby.

Hon-a-a-ay.

\* A famous levee contractor.

† "Mule-skinner," mule-driver.

‡ Such a fact is conceivable with a skillfully handled whip.

## FORT WORTH AND DALLIS BLUES

The prototype of a thousand blues tunes, Lead Belly sang it while he lived in Dallas and Fort Worth. He remembers that it was especially popular at the Big Four Negro resort down near the terminal in Dallas. "Me an' Blind Lemon would play dat song, an' de womens would come runnin'. Lawd have mercy! They'd hug an' kiss us so we could hardly play."

*Not fast*  
♩ = 132-160

Got de Fort Worth blues an' de Dal - lis heart dis -  
ease,  
Got de Fort Worth blues an' de  
Dal - lis heart dis - ease,  
Cain'  
keep my wo - man, Lawd, f'om worry - in' me.  
Cain' lay down for dream - in', an' I  
jus' cain' sleep for cryin',

[ 136 ]

As Sung by Lead Belly

---

Cain' lay down for dream-in', an' I jus' cain' sleep  
for cryin', I jus' cain' wear-a dat black  
wo - man off my min'. \*

\* The two forms of the melody alternate almost regularly.

Got de Fort Worth blues an' de Dallis heart disease,  
Got de Fort Worth blues an' de Dallis heart disease,  
I cain' keep my woman, Lawd, f'om worryin' me.

Cain' lay down for dreamin', an' I jus' cain' sleep for cryin',  
Cain' lay down for dreamin', an' I jus' cain' sleep for cryin',  
I jus' cain' wear dat black woman offa my min'.

C. C. RIDER

As "darn" is to "damn," so "C. C. Rider" is to "easy rider." Clarence Williams has something of the same air under the title, "I Never Knew What the Blues Were," and claims that the tune started with him. If he did conceive it, we want to thank him for one of the sweetest of American melodies. Carl Sandburg has another variant of the air on page 246 of the "Songbag," but we prefer any one of Lead Belly's three variants to either of the two above mentioned.

## Negro Folk Songs

*Blue*

*J=138-180, somewhat free*

*1st Stanza*

Musical score for the 1st Stanza of "Ride Down". The music is in 4/4 time, treble clef, and includes a key signature change from B-flat major to A major. The lyrics are:

Oh, C. C. Ri - do, a - see what you done done,  
Lawd, C. C. Ri - do, see what you done done,  
C. C. Ri - do, see what you done done,  
Hey, hey - y, hey, hey - y.

*3rd Stanza*

Musical score for the 3rd Stanza of "Ride Down". The music is in 4/4 time, treble clef, and includes a key signature change from B-flat major to A major. The lyrics are:

When you see me com - in', put yo' man out-do's,  
Hey, see me com - in', put yo' man out - do's,  
See me com - in - n' put yo' man out - do's.

As Sung by Lead Belly

The musical score consists of four stanzas of lyrics with corresponding musical notation. The first stanza starts with a single note followed by a series of eighth notes. The second stanza begins with a measure labeled "9th Stanza". The third stanza starts with a measure in parentheses. The fourth stanza starts with a measure in parentheses. The lyrics are:

Hey,        hey,        hey,        hey - y.  
I tried      to fin - n'      ho - ney girl I know,  
I tried      to fin'      ho - ney girl I know,  
I tried to      fin'      ho - ney girl I know,  
Hey,        hey - y,        hey,        hey - y. \*

\* Any of the three variant melodies can be, and by Lead Belly is, used for singing any of the stanzas printed.

Oh, C. C. Rido, a-see what you done done,  
Lawd, C. C. Rido, a-see what you done done,  
C. C. Rido, see what you done done,  
Hey, hey, hey, hey.

Made me love you, now yo' man done come.\*

When you see me comin', put yo' man outdo's,

When you see me comin', hist yo' windows high.

When you see me leavin', hang yo' head an' cry.

\* Each line expanded as in first stanza.

## Negro Folk Songs

Look here, pretty mamma, what you got on yo' min'?  
Tryin' to rule, tryin' to fool dat man o' mine.  
I walked up to de nation \* an' de territo',  
I tried to fin' a honey girl I know.  
If I was a catfish, swimmin' in de deep blue sea,  
I'd keep those women f'om fussin' over me.

### DE KALB BLUES

This song was named for the east Texas town from which Lead Belly was sent up with thirty years for murder. † The guitar accompaniment is full of grim black thunderous notes like a death march. One listens and feels vaguely full of foreboding.

J=138-160

De Kalb blues, babe, make me feel so bad,

De Kalb blues, babe, make me feel so bad,

Just to think a - bout de times I once have had.

\* The Chickasaw or Cherokee nation. Both were part of the Indian Territory, which at the end of the last century became Oklahoma. This stanza, definitely forty or fifty years old, hints at the extensive intermarriage that went on between Indians and Negroes.

† He was tried at New Boston, the county seat.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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*Var. 1.*      *2nd stanza, 3rd line*

Lawd, de De Kalb wo-mén dey

would not have no home. Buy me a pis - tol,

get me a Gat - lin' gun,

Buy me a pis - tol, get me a Gat - lin' gun - n.

\* This form of the first two lines occurs in a few stanzas.

De Kalb blues, babe, make me feel so bad,  
De Kalb blues, babe, make me feel so bad,  
Just to think about de times I once have had.

Wasn' for de powder an' de straightenin' comb,\*  
Lawd, de De Kalb women would not have no home.

Wasn' for de powder an' de sto'-bought hair,  
De Kalb women would not go nowhere.

Blues was whisky, stay drunk all de time,  
Stay drunk, baby, got you off my min'.

Won' cook no dinner, won' wash no clo'es,  
Woman, you won' do nothin', hon', but walk de road.

\* Repeat the first line in every stanza, as in the first.

## Negro Folk Songs

---

Heart ain' i'on, babe, mus' be marble stone,  
'Cause I took you in when you did not have no home.

Good-lookin' woman, can I go home wid you?  
I done ast you, that's all a po' boy can do.

Heard you had money, an' I come to see,  
Would you take a po' ol' slave like me?

You can go if you ain' feared of my man,  
He's a bad man wid a forty-one in his han'.

Bad man comin', comin' wid his gun,  
I ain' got a gun but I ain' gonna run.

I'd rather be dead an' be in my grave,  
Than be here to be some woman's slave.

Train I'm ridin' don' do no stoppin' here,  
Keep on ridin', find some woman to feel my care.

### SHORTY GEORGE

Past the Central State Convict Farm at Sugar Land, Texas, there chugs every day a short train. The men have named it "Shorty George," and, because on Sunday afternoons it carries away the Negro women and visitors, they sing about it as if it were some "sweet-black" man.

The text of this version of a Texas prison farm blues is probably less corrupt than that printed under the same title in "American Ballads and Folk Songs"; the melody, an interesting variant.

As Sung by Lead Belly

*J=164-180*

Yes - a, Shor - ty George ain' no friend of mine,  
Shor - ty George, he ain' no friend of mine,  
He keeps a - ta - kin' all de wo - men,  
leav - vin' de men be - hin'.

Yes-a, Shorty George ain' no friend of mine,  
Shorty George, he ain' no friend of mine,  
He keeps a-takin' all de women, leavin' de men behin'.

Laid down last night, dreamin' in my sleep,  
That I saw my baby, makin' a 'fo'-day creep.\*

Got up dis mornin', Lawd, I fold my arms,  
Lawd, too late to holler, when de train done gone.

Some got six months, some got two an' three years,  
But they's so many good men got lifetime here.

Shorty George done been here an' gone,  
He's takin' all de women, leavin' de man alone.

Taken so many women, Lawdy, from de men,  
An' dey so many good men, lifetime in de pen.

\* Coming in from a very late date or going out for a sunrise party.

## SO DOGGONE SOON

"So Doggone Soon," which Lead Belly composed in the Louisiana State Penitentiary, is a mélange of stanzas from many different "blues." It is particularly interesting since it probably represents the development of his "talking" technique in its earliest stage—each section a simple summary of the stanza that is to follow, serving to connect it with the preceding stanza.

*J=104-152, somewhat free*

Yes, I got up this mor - nin - n',  
 got up so dog - gone soo - n,  
 Well, I got up this mor - nin - n',  
 got up so dog - gone soo - oo - oon,  
 Till I couldn' see no - thin - n',  
 hon - ey, but de stars an' moon.

*Var. 1.*

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Yes, I got up this mornin', got up so doggone soon;  
Well, I got up this mornin', got up so doggone soon,  
Till I couldn't see nothin', honey, but de stars an' moon.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

When I git up soon in de mornin', I couldn't lay back down. It's de custom of de camp to git up at three-thirty an' three o'clock ev'ry mornin'. When I walk out, I couldn't see nothin' but de stars an' de moon. I 'gin to think about Shreveport, Lou'siana.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Yes, I got up this mornin', could not lay back down;  
Yes, I got up this mornin', could not lay back down,  
Thinkin' 'bout my baby, livin' in Taylor Town.\*

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

I would be thinkin' 'bout my honey in Shreveport, Lou'siana, better known as the sun gonna shine in my do' some day. † I knowed some day, when I leave here, it wouldn't be happen no mo'. ‡

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

The sun gonna shine in my back do' some day;  
Lawd, the sun gonna shine in my back do' some day.  
Goin' back to north Lou'siana, goin' back there to stay.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

I knowed when I leave here I wasn't comin' back no mo'.

\* A short stop on the outskirts of Shreveport.

† A conflict between a trite phrase and a pretty simile. What is meant: Seeing his honey in Shreveport some day is like the sun shining into one's back door after a long, hard winter.

‡ "I won't come back here no mo'"—antique Negro dialect.

## Negro Folk Songs

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

I leave here walkin', hang crape on de do',  
If I leave here walkin', hang crape on de do';  
I may not be dead, but I ain' comin' back here no mo'.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

I'm thinkin' 'bout I had lots to tell my baby when I git back there.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Gonna tell my baby when I git back home;  
Gonna tell my baby when I git back home,  
Lawd, I been down yonder where de lights burn all night long.\*

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

I think about de woman I was lovin'. I dream 'bout Shreveport,  
Lou'siana, on Texas Avenue. †

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Ain' but de one thing I want you to do;  
Ain' but de one thing, baby, I want you to do,  
I want you to meet me on Texas Avenue.

I wouldn' min' rollin' ‡ no two, three years;  
I wouldn' min' rollin' no two, three years,  
But I'll tell de gov'nor, can't go ten or twelve.

\* In the dormitories of southern prison farms, where sometimes as many as two hundred men sleep in the same room, the lights are kept burning all night long to prevent escape, fights, knifing in the dark. Lead Belly could not and would not sleep in a dark room, until Martha came North to marry him. She broke him of a habit that four and a half years at Angola had ingrained.

† The main street of Shreveport.

‡ Serving time.

**THE TALKIN' BLUES**

## 'FO-DAY WORRY BLUES \*

The woman before Martha, his present wife, was Era, now serving time in the "Frederic Pen" in New Orleans for bootlegging. They lived together very happily, Lead Belly and Era, until he began to go out to play for dances in the country and not get back "'fo' day in de mornin'." Era would be left at home all night by herself to think about what was going on at that dance with all those women making up to her husband. She knew how things went since she herself had first met Lead Belly at a dance. One night she got madder and madder and, when Huddie came in and lay down across the bed, she grabbed his beautiful twelve-string guitar and smashed it against the wall.

"Only time I wanted to kill a woman was when Era broke dat guitar. Cos' me twenty dollars. But I think 'bout they'd hang me for it, so I jes' beat her pretty bad. She washed for three months to git me another one."

This song probably had a written origin.

*J= 112-168, free †*

Nyah - ah,                       hey, hey, hey, hey,  
Nyah - ah,                       dad-dy, you on my mind.  
I ain' got (-a) but dis mi - nute,                   dat's when I am

\* See Melotone Record M13327-A, titled "'Fore-Day Worry."

† The division into bars is quite tentative.

## Negro Folk Songs

The musical score consists of four stanzas of lyrics with corresponding musical notation. The music is in common time, with a key signature of one sharp. The lyrics are as follows:

cryin'. An' I would not been here,  
had not been for you,

An' I would not been here, had not been for  
you, Treat me low down and dir - ty,

dad - dy, that's the way you do.

*3rd Stanza, free*  
Oh, put - ty pa - po',  
etc.

*4th Stanza, strict time*  
Oh, put - ty pa - po',  
etc.

Nyah, dad - dy, what a low down feel - in'!

\* The division into bars is quite tentative.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

That was a song I learned f'om my wife, Era. Was in de kitchen,  
cookin' my breakfast', an' I'd been out all night long. An' she 'gin  
to cry an' I was so shamed of myse'f to see her standin' in there cryin'  
I go an' pat her on de shoulder an' here was de word she said:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Nyah-ah, hey, hey, hey, hey,  
Nyah-ah, daddy, you on my min'.  
I ain' got but dis minute, dat's when I am cryin'.

An' I would not been here, had not been for you,  
An' I would not been here, had not been for you,  
Treat me low-down an' dirty, daddy, that's de way you do."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

I had been out all night long, an' she begin to think about what I  
had done; an' she 'gin cryin' an' she raise this ol' song,

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Oh-h, putty papo,  
Oh-h, putty papo,  
I ain' gonna be yo' low-down dog no mo',  
I been yo' dog eveh since I entered yo' do'.

Nyah-ah, daddy, what a low-down feelin'!  
Nyah-ah, daddy, what a low-down feelin'!

I'm goin' away, wear you off my min',  
I got de blues, babe, jus' cain' keep f'om cryin',  
I got another putty papo to ease me to keep me from cryin'."

## Negro Folk Songs

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

I couldn' stan' to hear her sayin' that word about she had another putty papa. I had to get up an' go in the kitchen to see what de matter wid her. She commence a-cryin' again.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

(Repeats the first two stanzas.)

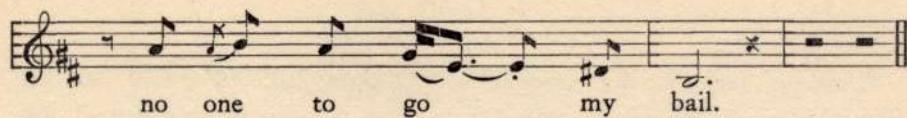
### JAIL-HOUSE BLUES

"The ol' jail house git ha'nted to a man. When you in jail, look like col' chills runs all over you. It kills a man to stay there if it's not but a day."

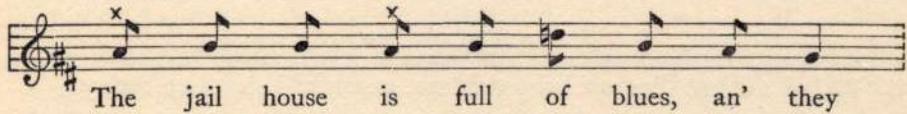
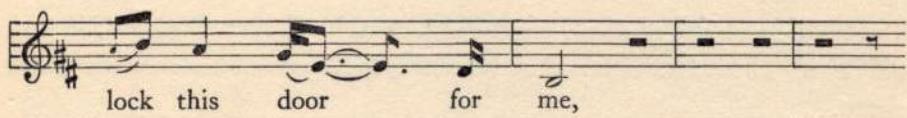
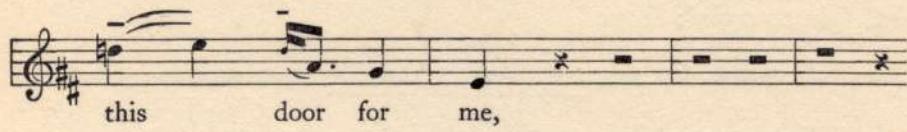
*J=126-152*

Thir - ty days in the work-house,  
six long months in jail,  
Thir - ty days in the work-house,  
six long months in jail,  
Now they got me in trou - ble,

As Sung by Lead Belly



*4th Stanza:*



LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Thirty days in the workhouse, six long months in jail,  
Thirty days in the workhouse, six long months in jail,  
Now they got me in trouble, no one to go my bail.

## Negro Folk Songs

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### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

This po' man, he was beggin' to get outa jail. His wife had tol' him that night, she says, "Daddy, please doncha leave home." He poked out his mouth an' went on anyhow. An' 'fo' day nex' mornin' he was locked up in jail an' had thirty days an' six months hung up over his head 'fo' he could git back home to his sweet mamma. An' after he sit down there in the jail house, he 'gin to think at night. He had lots of friends, but wouldn' no friends come around to see him. He 'gin to cryin':

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"When a man git in trouble, ev'ybody turns him down,  
When a man git in trouble, ev'ybody turns him down,  
Now I b'lieve to my soul that I'm prison-bound."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

He sit down an' cried all night long, thinkin' 'bout what his wife had tol' him. If he had listened at his wife, he figgered he wouldn' been there.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Had-a done like my baby tol' me, wouldn' been here today,  
Had-a done like my baby tol' me, wouldn' been here today,  
I would not been in trouble, six long months to stay."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

The ol' jail house got ha'nted to the man. When you in jail, look like col' chills runs all over you. It kills a man to stay there if it's not but a day. The man begin to think about his wife. He run up to the jailer when he come up there to lock de do' an' feed the men. He run up to the jailer beggin' for mercy:

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Now, please, Mister Jailer, unlock de do' for me,  
Aw, please, Mister Jailer, unlock de do' for me.  
The jail house is full of blues an' they done come down on me."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

They done sent him out on de road gang. He worked hard, an' his time was almos' out. But, anyhow, he was crazy to git home to his wife. He run up to de man an' beg him to let him go home.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"I'm a hard-workin' pris'ner, sent here without a trial,  
I'm a hard-workin' pris'ner, sent here without a trial,  
Now my heart is achin' to stay here this great, long while."

## ROBERTA

We once asked Lead Belly to sing us a low-down, barrelhouse blues. "When I used to play down on Fannin Street in Shrevepo't an' all de womens would git 'bout half-drunk," he said, "they'd 'gin to holler an' tell me, say, 'Baby, play us "Roberta"!' I'd sing 'em 'bout Roberta an' they'd all 'gin to cry."

Then Lead Belly, after a series of magnificent runs on his twelve-string guitar, sang high and shrill, "Run here, Roberta." This call of a man after his "rider" rings clear, like a rooster's crowing just before day. It has the sound in it of miles of bottom land. It could leap over a wide stretch of the quiet, lonely Mississippi like the whistle of a steamboat.

The man is drunk. Distance means nothing to him. He has something on his mind he's got to tell Roberta, and it's important even if he's not quite sure of what it is. So Roberta "might as well as to come on down an' listen," because he can outrun the train and he can outrun the steamboat. If she still won't listen to him, he'll have her arrested and make her listen. He doesn't even know why he wants

## Negro Folk Songs

Roberta so much. She looks like all the other "brown-skins with coal-black, wavy hair," but "it's her I want and it's her I'll have."

We wonder whether it is a cross-cousin to the old Negro song which began: "De shortes' day an' de longes' night was de day Roberta died."

*J=138-160, free*

Run here, Ro - ber - ta, sit down on my knee,

Run here, Ro - ber - ta, sit down on my knee.

Got some - thing (to) tell you, an'  
dat's been wor - ryin' me.

thought I spied my (um) ol' - time used - to - be.

Last stanza:

She's a brown-skin wo - man, got black wav-y hair,

Var. 1. 2. 3. 4.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Run here, Roberta, sit down on my knee,  
Run here, Roberta, sit down on my knee.  
Got something to tell an' dat's been worryin' me.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

This man, he was likin' Roberta. An' Roberta was a li'l' brown-skin woman wid coal-black, wavy hair. This man was all time hangin' roun' Roberta, wouldn't give her no peace an' no res'. She tried to get away from him. She got tired o' seein' him, an' she went to runnin' on a steamboat down de Mississippi River. De man went an' sit on de banks o' de river where he knew Roberta had to pass by. An' he look way up de river, an' here what he said:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"I'm down on de river, sittin' down on de groun',  
I'm down on de river, sittin' down on de groun'.  
Gonna stay right here, Lawd, till Roberta come down."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

He looked way up de river, an' he thought he spied Roberta. But he didn't see nobody—nothin' but a cypress tree.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Way up de river, far as I can see,  
I thought I spied my ol'-time used-to-be."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

He looked, an' he thought he spied de steamboat comin'. But it wasn't nothin' but a cypress tree.\*

\* A huge cypress log, floating down the river butt-end on, its roots spreading fanwise over the water, might be mistaken in the misty distance for a small river steamer.

## Negro Folk Songs

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"I thought I spied my old-time used-to-be,  
Lawd, it was nothin', honey, but a cypress tree."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

By an' by the steamboat come around de curve. An' it was comin'  
close by him. He looked out an' he called Roberta by her nachul  
name:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Oh-h, Roberta, sit down on my knee,  
Run here, Roberta, sit down on my knee,  
Got something to tell you keeps on worryin' me."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

When Roberta wouldn't come, he kep' on downstream. He had to  
drive about fifty miles. I don' know how he done it—that man made  
it all around de ben' by Laura's house—an' anyway he right there at  
de landin' when de boat come in. He runned up an' he called to  
Roberta:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"You's a brown-skin woman, choc'late to de bone,  
An' you know good an' well I cain' leave you alone."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

When Roberta wouldn't come an' talk to him, he broke off up to  
de police station.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"I'm goin' to de station, tell de chief police,  
Roberta done quit me, I cain' see no peace."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

When he got de police station, de police ask him how they gonna know Roberta from any other brown-skin. All of 'em is brown-skin now, an' all got black, wavy hair. You take a black woman, she brown jus' like a teasin' brown. She got so much powder on her face—high-brown powder—you cain' tell whether she brown or black. De man looked at de chief police an' here what he said:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"She's a brown-skin woman, got black, wavy hair,  
She's a brown-skin woman, got black, wavy hair,  
I can subscribe \* her, podner, mos' anywhere."

## DEATH LETTER BLUES

Lead Belly seldom sings this blues because it makes him think about death and he gets "worried" and because the accompaniment, that moves like a fast mail train clicking over the sleepers, makes him sweat.

The first, second, fourth, fifth, and sixth stanzas occur in one form or another in nearly all versions of "Death Letter Blues," so that, remarkable among blues, the song always has a fairly definite pattern. We surmise that this pattern was set by the hit recording "Colorado Springs Blues"—an instance of the profound influence of the phonograph on American folk singing.

\* Describe.

## Negro Folk Songs

*Fast, strained*  
♩ = 138-160

Yes, she wrote me a let - ter, what you reck'n it read?

Oh, yes, she wrote me a let - ter,

what you reck'n it read? "Come

home, sweet pa - po, yo' lov - in' ba - by's dead."

Yes, I went to de de - pot

\* The two forms alternate, although not quite regularly.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Yes, she wrote me a letter—what you reckon it read?  
‘Come home, sweet papo, yo’ lovin’ baby’s dead.’"

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Sho ’nough dis man he got his letter. When he got de letter he hadn’ been home in seven long years. When he got de letter his wife was dead, he went to de depot an’ he caught de train. It didn’ stop at no short stops,\* but he retch up an’ got it anyhow. When he got home, here what he tol’ his mamma:

\* The man was living in a small town where the trains stopped only when they were flagged.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Yes, I went to de depot, caught de train a-flyin'."  
When he walked in, Lawd, she was slowly dyin'.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

His mamma saw him befo' he got home. Yo' mamma be waitin' for you, she gonna know you home befo' you git aroun' de corner. She walked out, an' she looked at her son an' 'gin to tell him howdy. Papa run to de bedside an' tol' his darlin' daughter-in-law good-by. Here what de boy said when he got home:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"My mamma said, 'Howdy,' papa said, 'Good-by,'  
Po' boy couldn't do nothin' but hang his head an' cry."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Po' boy went to de bedside; looked down in his baby's face. She didn't know him from nobody else. When he looked down in her face, here what he said in his min':

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Lawd, he went to de bedside, looked down in her face,  
Cryin', 'I love you baby, but I jus' cain't take yo' place.'"

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

He looked out de window. So many hacks and buggies standin' aroun', waitin' on his po' sick wife. He knowed it was something wrong. He poked his head out de window an' commence a-cryin':

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"So many hacks an' buggies are a-standin' aroun',  
Waitin' to take my baby to the buryin' groun'."

## Negro Folk Songs

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### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

He goes to de bedside, an' he knows his wife was gonna die. His wife died, an' he taken her to de buryin' groun'. When they taken her to de buryin' groun', he goes an' puts his hands on de preacher's shoulders an' here what he said:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"You done taken my baby to de buryin' groun',  
You done taken my baby to de buryin' groun'."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

What happen dere?

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"You don' break my heart, Lawd, till you let her down.  
You don' break my heart, Lawd, till you let her down."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

He goes to de headboard where his wife was buried at. Ev'body done gone home. He fell down on his knees.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Yes, he went to de headboard, fell down on his knees.  
"Can you speak one word, babe, give my heart some ease?"

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Sho 'nough he goes back home an' runs aroun' in de yard. House was col' lonesome when his wife was gone.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Doncha house look lonesome, when yo' women done gone?  
Doncha feel mistreated an' you won't let on?"

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

He goes to de well to get him a bucket o' water, an' he carries it back to de house.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

You don' miss yo' water, till yo' well goes dry;  
You don' miss yo' mamma, till she shakes yo' han' good-by

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

So he goes on, an' his wife worries him so bad when she was gone. She worried him at night, an' he woke up in de bed at midnight. An' here what he said to his wife—she was in de graveyard:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Will you tell me, pretty mamma, what kind o' woman is you?  
Jus' want to know, pretty mamma, how come you do me like  
you do, do, do?"

## BLIND LEMON

Lead Belly named this knife-blues after Blind Lemon Jefferson, a famous and very popular Negro blues singer with whom he used to play on the street corners, in the saloons and red-light houses of Dallas and Forth Worth. At one time Blind Lemon's records were best sellers, and he made a great deal of money, but he lost all he had and died in poverty, somewhere in Ohio.

We are quite sure that Lead Belly is not recounting in this semi-ballad any incident out of Blind Lemon's life, although at one time he did explain the song in that way. We suspect, on the contrary, that he learned it from Blind Lemon, and, having once named it for him, gradually came to believe it concerned his life. In any case, one feels that the story happened: it is so full of strength and kindness and

## Negro Folk Songs

broken years. And when one hears Lead Belly's knife sliding up and down the strings of his six-string box, and when the strings are whining and crying, this poignancy of the tale is immediately evident —the tale of an old man who, after he and his wife had lived together "to get seventy-five years old apiece," went wandering away and left her with "a piano an' two chillun, a li'l' boy an' a li'l' girl."

*Rather fast*  
 $J=144-168$

Dream las' night an' all night night be - fo',  
Lawd, I dream las' night an' all night night be - fo',  
Dream las' night an' all night night be - fo'.

\*This figure is actually:

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

This here piece is about a man. Him an' his wife live together to get seventy-five years old apiece, an' he jus' thought to leave home. An' he walked away from home one mornin' wid a stick. He left a piano an' two chillun, a li'l' boy an' a li'l' girl, at home. He stayed away three long years, an' his wife didn' know where he was. Well, anyhow, while he was gone, his wife lay down an' got to dreamin' two nights. The first night she dream about her husband. The nex'

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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night she dream about her husban'. An' she set up on de side o' de bed  
an' 'gin to sing. An' here what she said when she fust started:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Dream las' night an' all night night befo'.  
Lawd, I dream last night an' all night night befo',  
Dream las' night an' all night night befo'."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

When she 'gin to sing, the li'l boy jumped up; it woke him. Li'l boy run to his mamma an' say, "Mamma, what did you dream them las' two nights?" An' here what she tol' her son:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"I heard your papa knockin' on my do'.  
Lawd, I heard your papa knockin' on my do',  
I heard your papa knockin' on my do'."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

After de three years was out, sho 'nough de man come an' he knocked on de do', an' here what he said to his wife:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Cryin', "My babe, have I ever done you wrong?"  
Lawd, cryin', "My babe, have I ever done you wrong?"  
Cryin', "My babe, have I ever done you wrong?"

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

He know good an' well he done her wrong. Had been gone three long years. Hadn' wrote her a scratch an' hadn' sont her a nickel o' money. But, anyhow, he sit out there, an' here what he tol' her again:

## Negro Folk Songs

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Ef I have, will you forgive me, please?  
Lawd, ef I have, will you forgive me, please?  
Ef I have, will you forgive me, please?"

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

The preacher had been visitin' his wife. She was one o' de deacon sisters out o' de amen corner in de Baptist chu'ch. The preacher had been over there, an' he said: "Now, listen, sister. Is you gonna take him back when he comes?" She raised her hand befo' Godamighty, an' she swore to Chris' she wouldn't take him back no mo'; but, when he come in that mornin' jus' befo' day an' sat out there an' sung his las' song, she was sittin' on de bedside, listenin' at him. She got up an' walk to de do' wid her hands behin' her; an' she forgot what she tol' de preacher, an' she forgot what she tol' de good Lawd. An' here what she said to her husban':

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"You's a long time comin', daddy, but you welcome here.  
Lawd, you's a long time comin', daddy, but you welcome here.  
You's a long time comin', daddy, but you welcome here."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

She had two li'l' chillun, a li'l' boy an' a li'l' girl. She tol' the li'l' boy to play the piano piece for his papa; let him know what he had learnt since his papa been gone. Li'l' boy jumped down—he couldn't play but one piece; but he played it anyhow. [Here Lead Belly imitates a simple piano tune.]

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Ol' lady commence a-cryin':

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Lawd, have mercy on me,  
Lawd, have mercy on me,  
Lawd, have mercy on me."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

She tol' de li'l' girl to play de las' piece on de piano. De li'l' girl jump down an' commence to whip it to a gravy. [Lead Belly plays imitation on the bottom frets of high E, B, and G, of a very pianissimo piano.]

## MISTER TOM HUGHES'S TOWN

This is the saddest and gayest of all Lead Belly's songs. It is his own ballad and his own estimate of the most important conflict of his life. He prophesies his destiny and at the same time accepts and defies it. The melody is that of a vulgar red-light song. The accompaniment is the swiftest, most intricate and exciting of his entire repertoire, just as if Lead Belly were saying: "This is what I wanted. This is what I was made for. This is what I had to have. This is what I found, and I like it."

If Lead Belly had stayed at home when his mamma pulled at his elbow, he might have grown up respectable, joined the church, given up his guitar-playing, and settled down to add more land to his father's acres; but there was something wild about him that couldn't endure the good little country girls and the slow business of being a solid and going-to-church citizen. He hated to break his mother's heart and leave her crying behind him, yet he had to walk away from her with the "tears runnin' over de back" of his head.

I tol' my mamma,  
"Mamma, you don' know—  
Women in Shrevepo't gonna kill me,\* why doncha let me go?"

\* "If the women in Shreveport gonna kill me anyhow, why not get it over and done with?"

## Negro Folk Songs

They very nearly did kill him, and he went to the penitentiary twice. But Lead Belly was loyal. He worked his way out of the pen to return again to his best audience.

J=92-120

Fol - low me down,  
Fol - low me down,  
Fol - low me down to Mis - ter Tom Hughes's (town).  
Um,  
Um.  
Um,  
Um,  
Um,  
Um,  
Um,  
Um,  
Um,  
Um,  
Um,

Hummed stanzas:

Um,  
Um,

1. Var. in other stanzas:

Um,  
Um,

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

This here's a song I compose about Mister Tom Hughes's town, better known as Shrevepo't, Lou'siana. Tom Hughes is de high

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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sheriff, an' ev'y time I think about him seem like I could look right at him. I been wantin' to go down on Fannin Street all my life, an' my mamma she didn't want me to go, because she was feared somepin' might happen to me. They wouldn't low you down there wid no short pants on; but when you put on long pants you oughta ac' like a man, ef you ain' no man.

No sooner my mamma put long pants on me than I flew out de do'. I was sweet sixteen years old, an' I had a li'l' 'dopted sister at home. An' when I stepped out do's my mamma wouldn't know where I was goin', but here what I tol' her:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Follow me down,  
Follow me down,  
Follow me down to Mister Tom Hughes's town.  
Um—um!" \*

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

My mamma looked at me an' caught me by de arm an' tried to pull me back in de house. An' my li'l' 'dopted sister run up there, too. You know when yo' mother say somepin' to you—you got a li'l' sister —she gonna say somepin', too. My mamma, she tol' me when I turned around—

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

My mamma tol' me,  
My sister, too,  
"Th' women in Shreveport, son, gonna be th' death o' you."  
Um—um!

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

I looked at my mamma. Didn't aim to make her mad, didn't aim to make her feel bad. But I spoke to her jus' like this, an' not meanin' no harm:

\* In this song Lead Belly does his most effective "moaning."

## Negro Folk Songs

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

I tol' my mamma:  
"Mamma, you don' know—  
Women in Shreveport gonna kill me, why don' you let me go?"  
Um—um!

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

It broke my mamma's heart, an' she walked away f'om me wid her hands behin' her, cryin'. An' here what she said:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Um—um,  
Um—um,  
Um—um,  
Um—um—um—um!"

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

I looked at my mamma. I couldn' stan' to see my mamma cryin' offa de words I had spoke. I don' care how ol' you are, when you break yo' mother's heart, it gonna break yo' heart. I went to my mother an' fell down on my knees. An' here what I said to my mother:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

I went to my mamma,  
Fell down on my knees,  
Cryin', "O Lordy, mamma, will you forgive me please?  
Um—um!"

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

An' here I walked away from my mamma wid tears runnin' over de back of my head—

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Um—um,  
Um—um,  
Um—um,  
Um—um—um—um!"

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

I wanted my mamma to know what side of town I was runnin' on.  
So she wouldn't be worried about me when I leave home.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"I got a woman livin' on  
Stony Hill,  
Been settin' down gamblin' wid Buff'lo Bill." \*  
Um—um!

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

When she come in that night—it was a bad man (Buff'lo Bill), an'  
she didn't know who she was runnin' wid. An' when she tol' me I sit  
down an' give her egvice. An' here what I tol' her:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Been settin' down gamblin'  
Wid Buff'lo Bill,  
Two chances to one, baby, you ain' done got kill."  
Um—um!

\* This nonsensical stanza, which Lead Belly inserted to take the place of a vulgar one, was created at first not to make sense but to make a rhyme. The original lines were,

"I got a woman livin' on  
Back side de jail,  
Makes an honest livin' by de workin' . . ."

## Negro Folk Songs

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LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

She fell over, an' she commence a-cryin':

"Um—um,  
Um—um,  
Um—um,  
Um—um—um—um!"

LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

This here's the las' verse. Ef anybody should ask you who compose  
this song, you know what to tell 'em when I'm gone.

LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Ef anybody should as' you  
Who compose this song,  
Tell 'em Huddie Ledbetter done been here an' gone.  
Um—um.

## RED CROSS STO'

One Negro, at least, wasn't carried away by a patriotic desire to  
enlist during the last war. He is quite indifferent to his wife's desire  
for a hero.

The dialogue is authentic as to diction and manner.

*Conversationally until the chorus, then drunkenly*

*J=138-168*

Chorus:

I told her, "No - o - o,"

Ba - by, you know I don' want to go,

As Sung by Lead Belly

The musical score consists of three staves of music in common time (indicated by '4') and G major (indicated by a treble clef and two sharps). The first staff begins with a measure of two eighth notes followed by a sixteenth note. The lyrics 'Yes, an' I ain' go - in' down to dat' are written below the notes. The second staff starts with a measure of two eighth notes followed by a sixteenth note. The lyrics 'Red Cross sto'.' are written below the notes. The third staff starts with a measure of two eighth notes followed by a sixteenth note. The lyrics 'She says, Dad (-dy), "(I) jes' come by here to let you know,' are written below the notes. The fourth staff continues the melody. The fifth staff begins with a measure of two eighth notes followed by a sixteenth note. The lyrics 'They want you down to dat Red Cross sto'; I told her,' are written below the notes. The sixth staff concludes the melody.

LEAD BELLY SINGS:

*Chorus: \**

I told her, "No-o,  
Baby, you know I don' want to go,  
An' I ain' goin' down to no Red Cross sto'."

She says, "Daddy, I jus' come here to let you know,  
They want you down to that Red Cross sto'."

Says, "Daddy, I come here to set down on yo' knee—  
Ain' you goin' down there to fight for you an' me?"

Says, "Daddy, I jus' come here because I'm yo' wife—  
Ain' you goin' down there to fight for me an' yo' wife?"

She come here an' she shook my han',  
"Ain' you goin' down an' fight like a man?"

\* To be repeated after every two-line stanza.

## Negro Folk Songs

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### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

"Better get away from here, gal, 'cause you know I ain' goin' down to no Red Cross sto'. I ain' never been down there befo', an' I ain' goin' down there now."

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

She says, "I come here 'cause they feedin' mighty fine,  
Mixin' ev'ything up in whisky an' wine."

She says, "Daddy, they feedin' better than I ever seen,  
Feedin' ev'ybody offa pork an' beans."

She come back here an' says, "They feedin' offa ham,"  
Says, "Get away from here, gal, I don' give a damn."

I tol' her, "No-o,  
Baby, you know I don' want to go,  
An' I ain' goin' down to no Red Cross sto'."

### DONCHA LOVE ME NO MO'?

This song probably originated in Tin Pan Alley. The words and the rhymes are vapid and dull, the melody not of the folk-blues type; but Lead Belly, with his annotations, tells a rich story of what happens when a woman with a rambling mind marries a good-hearted, faithful hard-working fellow. The conclusion, where true love manages a compromise by means of a pocketful of dollars, convinces one that Lead Belly is no romanticist.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

Jazzy  
♩ = 126-160

Um - - -, ba - by, where you have to go,  
Um - - -, ba - by, where you have to go,  
You ain' love me, ba - by, you used to

Refrain:

love me so, Ba - by, don - cha love me no mo',  
don - cha love huh dad (-dy) no mo'?

\* From here on a number of other bar-divisions than the one suggested are possible.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Um-m, baby, where you have to go?  
Um-m, baby, where you have to go?  
You ain' love me, baby, you used to love me so.

### Chorus:

Baby, doncha love me no mo'?  
Doncha love yo' daddy no mo'?

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

This man, he married. First three months he was married, ev'y night his wife would meet him at de do' an' kiss him; she would have

## Negro Folk Songs

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his supper on de table, a good hot supper. He was a nice man. He wouldn't run around, an' he wouldn't go no place—from his work back home to his wife.

She stayed wid him about three months an' the nex' three months she had somewhere to go. Ev'y time her husban' come home, 'stead of havin' a hot supper on de table, she'd have her hair all down, gettin' ready to go. Supper be on de stove cookin', an' she'd tell him, say, "Daddy, finish yo' supper, 'cause I got to go 'way." Then he sit down an' looked at her for about three months afterwards an' wouldn't say nothin' to her. Then he spoke to her; an' when he came back from work nex' day his wife was gone. She was gone three hundred and sixty-five days from that day, better known as one year. When he found out whar she was, he taken a trip to see her. An' when he walked up to her, here what he said:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Um-m, when you lef', you broke my heart,  
Um-m, when you lef', you broke my heart;  
You said you loved me, baby, an' we would never part."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

She wouldn't have him. He goes back home, an' when he makes a pay-day, he goes back to his wife ag'in, tryin' to git her to come back to him.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Um-m, baby, yo' papa ain' no fool,  
Um-m, baby, yo' papa ain' no fool,  
There's something wrong, baby, sweet mamma's turnin' cool."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

She wouldn't come. He goes back home; an' he goes back de las' time. When he got two pay-days together, he had a pocketful of dollars. He goes back to his wife an' he rolls the money around in

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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his han's. When his wife saw de money, she let him come up to her  
an' put his arms around her an' ask her what was she gonna do—was  
she comin' back.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

“Um-m, baby, aincha comin’ back?  
Um-m, baby, aincha comin’ back?”  
“You got money, baby, what is it that I like.”

“Baby, doncha love me no mo’?  
Doncha love yo’ daddy no mo’?”

**BALLADS**

## DE *TITANIC* \*

During the World War and for a generation before it, the business of "ballit" or broadside selling among Negroes had its heyday. Wandering singers, many of them itinerant ministers, made a good thing of hawking, for a price that ranged from a nickel to twenty-five cents, copies of the songs they sang, printed on one side of sheets of vari-colored paper. The most widely celebrated tragedy of that era, the event that seems to have caught the imagination of the Negro, was the sinking of the *Titanic*. From the variety of ballads on this subject that have been discovered, we can only suppose that there must have been numerous songs composed and broadcast.

The most common form is a ballad-spiritual which points out that the rich man will surely be punished for his arrogance and selfishness. But Lead Belly's ballad is "worldly and sinful" and it places the responsibility for the tragedy on "Captain Smith," who drew the color line too sharply in refusing passage to Jack Johnson: "I ain' haulin' no coal." But the song ends triumphantly,

Black man oughta shout for joy,  
Never lost a girl or either a boy.

\* See same title in Carl Sandburg's *American Songbag*, pp. 254-256 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.); also Newman I. White, *American Negro Folk-Songs* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press).

## Negro Folk Songs

*Loud and swinging  
J=152-176, somewhat free*

Cap - tain Smith, when he got his load,  
Might 'a' heared him holl' - in', "All a - boā'd."  
Cry - in', "Fare thee, Ti - tan - ic,  
fare thee well." Cap - tain  
Smith, when he got his load, Might 'a'  
heared him holl' - in', "All a - boā'd." Cry - in',  
"Fare thee, Ti - tan - ic, fare thee well."

\* This section (4/4) has in the first few stanzas the duration of only 3/4, but later becomes clearly 4/4.

Captain Smith, when he got his load,  
Might 'a' heared him holl'in', "All aboā'd!"  
Cryin', "Fare thee, *Titanic*, fare thee well!"

As Sung by Lead Belly

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Captain Smith, when he got his load,  
Might 'a' heared him holl'in', "All aboa'd!"  
Cryin', "Fare thee, *Titanic*, fare thee well!"

Jack Johnson wanted to get on boa'd;  
Captain Smith hollered, "I ain' haulin' no coal."  
Cryin', "Fare thee, *Titanic*, fare thee well."

It was midnight on the sea,  
Band playin', "Nearer My God to Thee."  
Cryin', "Fare thee, *Titanic*, fare thee well."

*Titanic* was sinking down,  
Had them lifeboats aroun'.  
Cryin', "Fare thee, *Titanic*, fare thee well."

Had them lifeboats aroun',  
Savin' the women, lettin' the men go down.  
Cryin', "Fare thee, *Titanic*, fare thee well."

When the women got out on the land,  
Cryin', "Lawd, have mercy on my man."  
Cryin', "Fare thee, *Titanic*, fare thee well."

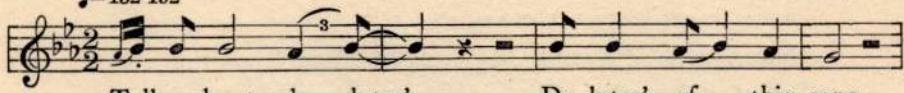
Jack Johnson heard the mighty shock,  
Might 'a' seen the black rascal doin' th' Eagle Rock.\*  
Cryin', "Fare thee, *Titanic*, fare thee well."

Black man oughta shout for joy,  
Never lost a girl or either a boy.  
Cryin', "Fare thee, *Titanic*, fare thee well."

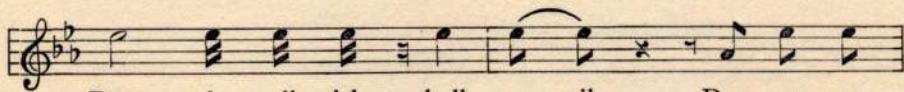
\* A particular dance step, like Black Bottom.

## DE BALLIT OF DE BOLL WEEVIL

Lead Belly learned this ballad from his Uncle Terrell Ledbetter. "Dat ol' man jes' walk an' sing. *Please* doncha give him no whisky; 'cause de music'll get too sweet, then." Note the "Farmer tol' de merchant" stanza, which is, so far as we can tell, the only class-conscious sentiment in Lead Belly's songbag.

*Vigorously* $\text{♩} = 152\text{-}192$ 

Talk a-bout de lates', De lates' of this song,



Dese de - vil - ish boll wee - vils, Dey gon - na



rob you of a home, Dey look - in' for a



home, Dey look - in' for a home.

*Short stanzas:*

I'll have a home, I'll have a home,



I'll have a home, I'll have a home.

LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Talk about de lates',

De lates' of this song,

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## As Sung by Lead Belly

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These devilish boll weevils,  
Dey gonna rob you of a home—  
Dey lookin' for a home,  
Dey lookin' for a home.

The first time I seed him,  
He was settin' on de square,  
The nex' time I seed him,  
He was spreadin' ev'ywhere—  
He was lookin' for a home,  
He was lookin' for a home.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

The farmer took de boll weevil, done ev'ything in de worl' he could to him.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Farmer taken the boll weevil,  
Put him in de san',  
Boll weevil said to de farmer,  
"Dis is treatin' me like a man—  
I have a home,  
I have a home."

Farmer taken the boll weevil,  
Put him in de ice,  
Boll weevil said to de farmer,  
"This is treatin' me mighty nice—  
I'll have a home,  
I'll have a home."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

'Member one time I taken a boll weevil. Put him in a bottle an' stopped it wid a cork. In a week I looked at it an' it was still lively. I don' believe nobody can kill a boll weevil. An' de farmer was doin'

## Negro Folk Songs

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ev'ything in de worl' he could to him, but ev'y time he went out 'cross  
de fiel' he could tell his wife somepin'.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

The farmer an' his ol' lady  
Went out 'cross de fiel'.  
The farmer said to de ol' lady:  
"I found a lotta meat an' meal—  
I'll have a home,  
I'll have a home,  
I'll have a home,  
I'll have a home."

Ol' lady said to de ol' man:  
"I'm tryin' my level bes',  
To keep dese devilish boll weevils  
Outa my ol' cotton dress—  
It's full of holes,  
It's full of holes,  
It's full of holes,  
It's full of holes."

Farmer said to de ol' lady:  
"What do you think of that?  
I got some devilish boll weevils  
In my ol' Stetson hat—  
It's full of holes,  
It's full of holes,  
It's full of holes,  
It's full of holes."

Farmer tol' de merchant,  
"I didn't make but one bale,  
Before I let you have that one,  
I'll suffer an' die in jail—

## As Sung by Lead Belly

I'll have a home,  
I'll have a home,  
I'll have a home,  
I'll have a home."

### ELLA SPEED<sup>1</sup>

Of all Lead Belly's repertoire this song is perhaps the finest combination of simple ballad style, unsophisticated folk melody, and fitting accompaniment. In the accompaniment, particularly, do we discover Lead Belly the folk artist; the guitar rings with the heavy, thunderous heartbeats of a man who has shot the woman he loves and knows he will be punished.

Lead Belly says that not long before he moved to Dallas, Bill Martin shot down Ella Speed in the street and that along with the other musicians of that area he composed this ballad.

*J=152-180, somewhat free*

Come all and take heed,  
Just re - mem - ber the death of El - la Speed.

1.  
Come all and take heed,  
Just re - mem - ber the death of El - la Speed.

\* The quite unusual modulation in the last line recurs in all stanzas.

<sup>1</sup> See "Alice B.," in Carl Sandburg's *American Songbag* (p. 28), and "Bill Martin and Ella Speed," in our *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. The text in the latter version is not entirely Lead Belly's.

## Negro Folk Songs

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Come all and take heed,  
Just remember the death of Ella Speed.  
Come all and take heed,  
Just remember the death of Ella Speed.

Ella Speed was downtown, havin' her lovin' fun,  
'Long come Bill Martin wid his cold 41.  
Ella Speed was downtown, havin' her lovin' fun,  
'Long come Bill Martin wid his cold 41.

Th' deed that Bill Martin done  
Was cold-blooded murder wid his cold 41.  
Th' deed that Bill Martin done  
Was cold-blooded murder wid his cold 41.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Bill Martin was a long an' slender man. An' he wasn' nothin' but a puffessional gambler. An' Ella Speed, she was one o' de star women. Which ev'ybody loved Ella Speed an' ev'ybody liked Bill Martin. But Bill Martin wouldn' hit a lick at a snake,\* which he was a bartender and puffessional gambler.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

The womens was all singin' wid a doneful soun',  
When Bill Martin shot de woman down.  
The womens was all singin' wid a doneful soun',  
When Bill Martin shot de woman down.

They looked all over de heart of that town,  
Lookin' for that bully, but he couldn' be foun'.  
They looked all over de heart of that town,  
Lookin' for that bully, but he couldn' be foun'.

\* So lazy and trifling "he wouldn' hit a lick at a snake if it started to bite him."

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

De judge an' de sheriff was lookin' for Bill Martin, when he went to work, shot de woman down. De women was tryin' to 'scribe Bill Martin.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Bill Martin, he was long an' slender,  
Better known by bein' a bartender.  
Bill Martin, he was long an' slender,  
Better known by bein' a bartender.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Well, I tell all the boys: "Don' kill no women. You might do aroun' an' you might kill a man; but please don' kill no women. They put you under de pen." \* De nex' day they looked for him an' they foun' him.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

When he was 'rested an' locked up in jail,  
Judge says, "Bill Martin, I never fail."  
When he was 'rested an' locked up in jail,  
Judge says, "Bill Martin, I never fail."

"De deed, Bill Martin, that you done,  
Your sentence—you know you oughta be hung.  
De deed, Bill Martin, that you done,  
Your sentence—you know you oughta be hung."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Bill Martin looked at de judge, an' he fell down on his knees.

\* This admonition Lead Belly himself has always adhered to. "They put you under de pen" means "gonna hang you or 'lerocute you an' bury you. When you kill a woman, mean you gone."

## Negro Folk Songs

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Bill Martin fell down upon his knees,  
Cryin', "Judge, have mercy on me."  
Bill Martin fell down upon his knees,  
Cryin', "Judge, have mercy on me."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

The judge looked at Bill Martin, an' he 'gin to think. He knowed Bill Martin. Had had him up before him lotsa times, but he never had got nothin' on him. An' he liked him. So he looked at Bill Martin an' 'gin to think what he's gonna tell him.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Bill Martin wring his han's an' he started to cryin'.  
Judge said, "I won' hang you, but I'll give you life-time."  
Bill Martin wring his han's an' he started to cryin'.  
Judge said, "I won' hang you, but I'll give you life-time."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

The judge looked at Bill Martin an' he 'gin to talk to him:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Think about your dirty deed—  
Cold-blooded—murderin' the po' girl, Ella Speed.  
Think about your dirty deed—  
Cold-blooded—murderin' the po' girl, Ella Speed."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Bill Martin was an awful good gambler. A good cooncan player an' dealer of monte. He sit down atter de judge give him life-time an' he fouled his hand.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Bill Martin sat down to play cooncan,  
Po' boy couldn' half play his han',  
Thinkin' 'bout de woman that he murdered,  
Had gone away to some far, distant lan'.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

They taken Bill Martin out de jail to de freight depot—where they gonna bring his po' wife's dead body by—so he could look at her an' see what a low-down deed he had done.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

They taken Bill Martin to de freight depot,  
The train come on easin' by;  
Waved his han' at de woman that he murdered,  
Po' boy hung down his head an' he cry:

"She's gone, she's gone, she's gone,  
An' cryin' won' bring her back.  
She's the onlies' woman dat I ever loved.  
She's gone down some lonesome railroad track.

"I love Ella Speed six feet in the groun',  
Lawd, Lawd, an' they ain' no hangin' aroun'.  
I love Ella Speed six feet in the groun',  
Lawd, Lawd, an' they ain' no hangin' aroun'."

De women all heard dat Ella Speed was dead,  
They all went home an' they re-ragged in red.  
De women all heard dat Ella Speed was dead,  
They all went home an' they re-ragged in red.

## Negro Folk Songs

---

They taken Ella Speed to the buryin' groun',  
They was all singin' wid a doneful soun'.  
They taken Ella Speed to the buryin' groun',  
They was all singin' wid a doneful soun'.

### FRANKIE AND ALBERT

Of late years this Negro ballad has been sung by college students who had no true understanding of its background; Mae West, John Held, Jr., and others have helped to give it a gay-nineties setting so that "Frankie and Albert" has been snickered at along with the extravagantly sentimental popular songs of that period. But, until the ballad fell into the hands of college students and barber-shop quartets, it remained a stark account of the central facts of a murder. The mountaineers and Negroes who sang it found nothing ridiculous in "Frankie and Albert."

For Lead Belly, who knows something about murder, the ballad is not funny or "overdone." He explains simply why Frankie came to shoot Albert, how she was hurt in her heart when she saw him "lovin' up" Alice Fry. When Albert falls "all in a knot," Lead Belly bawls out in the agony of a man with a 41 bullet in his guts, just as he has often heard men cry out in their death agony. Mrs. Johnson at the graveyard calls on the Lord to have mercy on her son; Lead Belly has heard Negro women at country funerals in Louisiana wail over their dead sons in just this way when the "coffin sounds."

In the realistic way of ballad makers, Lead Belly wastes no tears or trouble on Albert after his mother turns him over for the "las' time." He saves his pity for the survivors of the murder: Mrs. Johnson, who can't forgive or forget because Albert was her only son and sole support; and Frankie, cook in the white folks' kitchen, who had killed the man she loved. As in "Ella Speed," Lead Belly reiterates the friendly relations that existed between his Negro characters and the authorities.

This ballad is Lead Belly's "Ninth Symphony," through him becoming a small opera with stage directions.

*Dignified, rather slow  
♩=92-100, somewhat free*

Fran - kie was a wo - man,  
Ev - 'ry - bo - dy know, Made a hun-dred dol - lars  
Buy (her) man (a) suit o' clo'es. Was her man,  
Lawd, he done her wrong.

*I Moaned*

Oh, Lawd! Oh, Lawd!  
Oh, Lawd! Oh, Lawd!

*II Moaned*

Have mer - cy! Have mer - cy! Have

*III Screamed*

mer - cy! Have mer - cy! Oh, Lawd! Oh,  
spoken  
Lawd! Oh, Lawd! Oh, Lawd!

## Negro Folk Songs

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Frankie was a woman,  
Ev'ybody know,  
Made a hundred dollars,  
Buy her man a suit of clo'es.  
Was her man, Lawd, he done her wrong.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Albert had been out all night long. When he come in that morning just befo' day, he laid down 'cross de bed. Frankie was workin' in de white folks' kitchen, an' she tol' him, says, "Now listen, baby, I'm goin' an' cook breakfus'. You stay here an' I'll be back toreckly." Albert had his head all wrapped up in the sheet, but he was watchin' Frankie. An' no sooner had Frankie gone, the rascal got up and walked away. But Frankie didn't stay long. She had blood in her eyes already, an' so she doubled right back; an' when she got home, he was gone. He had left his six-shooter under his pillow. An' she walked to de bed and looked under his pillow and found his cold 41 an' was on his cold trail. She went out a-walkin'. She begins to slow-trail Albert; an' here what all the boys said:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Frankie went a-walkin',  
Did not go for fun,  
Had under her apron  
Albert's 41—  
"Gonna kill my man, 'cause he done me wrong."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Frankie went down to the saloon where they got they whisky an' beer at—on a credick right on if they ain't got no money. Whensomever Albert want to go on a bugger-rugger, he'd go down there to get his

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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whisky. So Albert had told the man, "If Frankie come, don' tell her where I am." But anyhow you take a white man, he ain' gonna tell you no lie—ef he know you. Ef he know bofe of you, he gonna give the woman the bes' en' of it. An' he know you got a good woman an' he know you doin' her wrong, he gonna tell her exac'ly where you is. So she walked up to de man.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Frankie went down to the town saloon,  
Called for a bottle of beer,  
Ast the lovin' bartender,  
"Have my lovin' man been here?  
He's my man, Lawd, he done me wrong."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

The bartender walked up to Frankie, an' when he come out \* he come out a-talkin'. When he come out a-talkin', he come out wid de nachul truth, an' he 'gin to run his hands through his hair. An' here what he said to Frankie:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Ain' gonna tell you no story,  
Ain' gonna tell you no lie,  
Albert lef' here about a hour ago,  
Woman name Alice Fry.  
He's your man, Lawd, doin' you wrong,  
He's your man, Lawd, doin' you wrong."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

She goes on again. After she goes on, a-walkin', she walked on down to that woman's house. She goes an' looks through de window-

\* From behind the bar.

## Negro Folk Songs

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glass, an' there was Albert sittin' in that woman's lap. Had his arms all round that woman an' Frankie couldn't stand it, it hurt her in her heart so bad. An' she didn't raise no 'larm. She tipped on by.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Frankie went by her house,  
Did not give no 'larm,  
Looked through the window-glass,  
Albert sittin' in the woman's arms.  
"There's my man, Lawd, doin' me wrong."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Frankie hauled off an' shot him. She shuts both eyes, an' she didn't know whichaway the ball was goin', but she p'inted it right at Albert. When she shot Albert, he fell down on his knees cryin' to the policeman.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Frankie, she shot Albert,  
Fell down on his knees,  
Cryin', "Oh, policeman!  
Don' let that woman kill me!  
I'm her man, an' I done her wrong,  
I'm her man, an' I done her wrong."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Frankie, she walked back to Albert, a-cryin'. An' she hauled off an' shot him ag'in. When she shot him that time he 'gin to think about his po' mother.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Frankie, she shot Albert,  
Fell all in a knot,

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

Cryin': "Oh, Mrs. Johnson,  
See where yo' son is shot!  
I'm your son an' the only one,  
I'm your son an' the only one."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Onlies' chil' Mrs. Johnson had in the worl'. Sent for Mrs. Johnson, she come a-runnin'. She come a-runnin', an' she look down on her son. When she got there, he knowed her, an' he spoke one word to his mother. It was the las' word he said.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Turn me over, mother,  
Turn me over slow,  
Turn me over for yo' las' time,  
Never turn me over no mo'.  
I'm your son, an' the only one,  
I'm your son, an' the only one."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Then Mrs. Johnson commence a-cryin':

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

#### I

"O Lawd,  
O Lawd,  
O Lawd,  
O Lawd." \*

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

She looked down on him ag'in. She fell down on her knees. She thought maybe God in the sky would he'p her son.

\* This feature of the ballad (stanzas I and II) is, so far as we know, Lead Belly's contribution to the "Frankie and Albert" tradition.

## Negro Folk Songs

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

#### II

"Have mercy!  
Have mercy!  
Have mercy!  
Have mercy!"

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Frankie went to Mrs. Johnson. Fell down on her knees—atter she had shot Albert.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Frankie went to Mrs. Johnson,  
Fell down on her knees,  
Cryin': "Oh, Mrs. Johnson,  
Will you forgive me, please?  
I kilt yo' son, 'cause he done me wrong."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Mrs. Johnson looked at Frankie an' wondered could she forgive her.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"I'll forgive you, Frankie,  
I'll forgive you not,  
Kilt po' Albert,  
Only support I'm got.  
He's my son, an' the only one.  
He's my son, an' the only one."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Mrs. Johnson 'gin to cry an' she walked away. Atter Frankie, she shot Albert, the policemen all heard it. One truck of policemen

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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come down; policemans come down an' held an inques' over Albert. An' they liked Albert, an' they liked Mrs. Johnson, an' they liked Frankie. They wanted to make ev'ything pleasant for all parties concerned, an' here what they said:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Rubber-tired hearse,  
Rubber-tired hack;  
Hearse to carry Albert to the graveyard,  
Hack to bring his mother back.  
Was her son, an' the only one."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

They taken Albert to the graveyard. When they taken Albert to the graveyard an' when they let him down, Frankie run to de graveyard, an' here what she said:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

\* Frankie went to the graveyard,  
When they let him down,  
Frankie was a-holl'in'  
Wid a doneful soun',  
"Kilt you, man, 'cause you done me wrong."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

After they buried Albert, Frankie went to de headboa'd, fell down on her knees.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Frankie went to de headboa'd,  
Fell down on her knees.  
"Speak one word, Albert,  
Gib my heart some ease.  
Kilt you, babe, 'cause you done me wrong;  
I kilt you, babe, 'cause you done me wrong."

## Negro Folk Songs

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LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Frankie went to de graveyard one mo' time, hatin' to go home.

LEAD BELLY SINGS:

I \*

“Bye-bye!  
Bye-bye!  
Bye-bye!  
Bye-bye!”

II

“Farewell!  
Farewell!  
Farewell!  
Farewell!”

LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Mrs. Johnson walked around the graveyard wid her arms folded.

LEAD BELLY SINGS:

I

“Oh, Lawd!  
Oh, Lawd!  
Oh, Lawd!  
Oh, Lawd!

II

“Have mercy!  
Have mercy!  
Have mercy!  
Have mercy!

\* See musical score.

As Sung by Lead Belly

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III

“My son!  
My son!  
My son!  
My son!”

IV

“Done gone!  
Done gone!  
Done gone!  
Done gone!”

A MISCELLANY  
WHITE INFLUENCES; PARDON SONGS

## MARY, DONCHA WEEP

Lead Belly once belonged to the Baptist church. He gave up drinking and running around at night and playing the guitar; he became a leader in the singing; but his conversion did not last long. Somebody begged him to play for a dance, offered him whisky and a little change, and he picked his guitar and sang and drank whisky all that Saturday night. The next morning he was too sleepy to go to church. He didn't care much anyway. He had watched the deacons and the elders on Saturday nights sneaking into the barrelhouses, seen them shoot craps, dance, and drink corn liquor with the rest. He had met sin-killing preachers walking the back lanes just before day in the morning. He had little respect for religion, although he enjoyed the show at church and the singing, as much as the holiest. In his own way he regarded most religious people as hypocrites. Martha is a good Baptist and really disapproves of Lead Belly's songs and his guitar playing, even though she admires him for his skill. When he played for her, she always sat perfectly quiet and expressionless, unless some one forced her to smile by smiling at her. But at Wilton, far away from her church group, exposed every day to the influence of sinful songs, seeing her husband make money out of his singing, her prejudices gradually cracked. One Sunday they both went off to church and, when they came in again, were giggling and talking excitedly. They came to us to explain. It seems that the Holy Ghost had entered into one old lady and she had danced in the aisles and shouted with pleasure. Lead Belly said, leering at Martha: "An' she sho was shakin' that thing. Lawd God, that ol' lady could really dance. Couldn' she Charleston, Marthy?" And Martha, being poked in the ribs, went off into gales of laughter while he grinned. Here was Lead Belly, then, winning his wife over to his point of view.

## Negro Folk Songs

Not that he is an atheist. On the contrary, he is continually calling on God to witness his word and to protect him, and, whenever he grows particularly unctuous, he will tell how God helped him through his trouble and will reward the righteous man (himself) and strike down the others. His belief is ironically simple, free from creed and superstition: "God will help you if you're good."

The following song is an expression of his attitude. He has taken a fine, familiar spiritual tune, collected a set of the most dramatic, colorful, spiritual verses, which are reverent, touching, and ridiculous by turns, and given them a realistic circumstantial background. Through the whole song he tries seriously to explain the stanzas in terms of dramatic situations, to give life to the tradition of his race. At the same time, through the eyes of his white audience, he is laughing at "nigger" religion. A mixture of minstrel show man and artist, so far as this song is concerned, he is not always sure of what he wants.

This song is further interesting, since it is the only spiritual except "You Shall Be Free," in Lead Belly's entire repertoire.

♩ = 168-212

"Won - der what Sa - tan's a - grum - blin' 'bout,  
Chain - ed in Hell an' he cain' git out."  
Pha - ra - oh's ar - my got (drown ded,)\*  
O Ma - ry, don - cha weep. O Ma - ry, don - cha

## As Sung by Lead Belly

weep an' don - cha moan, O Ma - ry, don - cha  
weep an' don - cha moan, Pha - ra - oh's ar - my got  
(drown - ded.)\* O Ma - ry, don - cha weep.

\* Sometimes Lead Belly doesn't sing these words, but carries the tune on the guitar.

### *Chorus:*

O Mary, doncha weep an' doncha moan,  
O Mary, doncha weep an' doncha moan,  
Pharaoh's army got drownded.  
O Mary, doncha weep.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Now Mary an' Marthy an' Laz'us was two sisters an' one brother. Laz'us got low sick, an' de good Lawd called Mary, she was goin' roun' moanin' so. (That's where Marthy \* got her name from, her proper name—outa de Bible atter Mary an' Marthy.) So they was moanin' so. God tol' Mary, "Don' weep about Laz'us because I can raise Laz'us." Mary didn' b'lieve it could be done, but Marthy had faith in de good Lawd.

Nobody couldn' do nothin' wid ol' Satan but de good Lawd. But God had him chain' down yonder where he could see de souls comin'

\* His wife.

## Negro Folk Songs

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in but he couldn' get at 'em. Ol' Satan was in de valley raisin' san'.  
Ol' Satan was lookin' at ev'ybody comin' in, an' they made up a song:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Wonder what Satan's a-grumblin' 'bout,  
Chained in Hell an' he cain' git out."  
Pharaoh's army got drownded,  
O Mary, doncha weep.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Ol' Satan's raisin' so much san' when ev'ybody come down there.  
So many people he couldn' git. He missed em. The people went  
aroun' an' made a song about ol' Satan:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Ol' Satan's mad an' I am glad,  
Missed that soul he thought he had."  
Pharaoh's army got drownded,  
O Mary, doncha weep.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

So dey goes on . . . Dey was two womens. Was deacons in de  
Baptis' chu'ch, better known as de amen corner. An' dey's bofe at one  
anudder's house,\* was settin' down, talkin' 'bout dey haid gettin' wet  
in de midnight dew. One sister said her haid got wet so many times  
in de midnight dew.† An' she touch de udder sister on de knee, an'  
here what she tol' her:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"My head got wet in de midnight dew.  
Sister, wontcha bear me a witness, too?"  
Pharaoh's army got drownded,  
O Mary, doncha weep.

\* For the faithful everything is possible.

† In the forest praying until after midnight, holding a lonely "grove-meeting."

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

After she goes on. Dey was a woman had a daughter. Was sweet sixteen years old. The daughter was takin' religion that night—goin' to de mourners' bench. So de girl got up soon one mornin' an' stepped outdo's an' ease on away f'om de house an' didn' come back no mo' till sundown. Woman run all over de neighborhood lookin' for her daughter. Cut a switch, said, "I'm gonna beat her down to de groun' when she comes back." Sho 'nough, when de girl come inter de house, de ol' lady run an' grabbed de switch an' drawed back. But she didn' bring it down. She listened at de li'l' girl's story. An here what de li'l' girl say to her mamma:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"I went down in de valley to pray,  
My soul got happy an' I stayed all day."  
Pharaoh's army got drownded,  
O Mary, doncha weep.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Two deacons outa de amen corner—mens—was goin' fishin' in de country. Had to cross a footlog over de branch. One got up on de footlog an' de odder was on de groun'. One was on de groun' was jivin' de one on de footlog. Here what he said:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Brother, you better min' how you walk on de cross,  
Foot might slip an' yo' soul get los'."  
Pharaoh's army got drownded,  
O Mary, doncha weep.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

He goes on. (Now this is de nex' to de las' verse.) God tol' brother Norah go build him a ark. Brother Norah didn' b'lieve what

## Negro Folk Songs

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God tol' him at firs', an' he had to tell him ag'in. Firs' time he tol' brother Norah, here what brother Norah done:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

God tol' Norah they's gonna be a flood,  
Norah stuck his head in de middle o' de mud.  
Pharaoh's army got drownded,  
O Mary, doncha weep.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

This here's de las' verse. When God tol' Norah ag'in, brother Norah thought he better get up an' turn 'roun' an' try to do li'l' somepin'. 'Cause God tol' Norah, "I'm gonna bring a flood, an' you won' have nowhere to stay." Norah thought he better get up an' build him a quick ark. An' here what he built his ark outa:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

God tol' Norah to build him a ark,  
Norah built de ark outa hick'ry bark,  
Pharaoh's army got drownded,  
O Mary, doncha weep.

## WHEN I WAS A COWBOY \*

In the summer of 1933, when we first found Lead Belly on the Louisiana State Prison Farm at Angola, we asked him if he knew any cowboy songs. He did. At the time we more or less believed that he had, as he claimed, "composed" this song himself. Since then, however, we have discovered that Lead Belly knows only part of a complicated and corrupt ballad that is current among both whites and Negroes in Texas.

\* See *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, pp. 379-380: a version of four stanzas, all that Lead Belly could remember in 1933. The melody and refrain are slightly different, and there is no "talking."

## As Sung by Lead Belly

Lead Belly has added several features that seem to be his own: the sixth stanza, which he uses again in a different form in "Mister Tom Hughes's Town"; the concluding lines—a widely known blues couplet. This detail he tacked on while he was with us. The reader will notice the contrast between the third and fourth stanzas, a gulf of silence that could be filled only by a whole short story or novel—Lead Belly's use of an effect vital to ballad technique.

*A fast trot*  
 $J=168-208$

The musical score consists of six staves of music in common time with a key signature of one sharp. The first two staves show the opening line "When I was a cowboy out on de wes-tern plains," repeated. The third staff begins with "I made a half a mil - lion, pull - in'" followed by a measure of rests. The fourth staff continues with "on de bri - dle reins. Come-a - cow-cow-yi-cky," and the fifth staff concludes with "cow - cow - yi - cky - yi - cky - yea." The sixth staff is a variation, labeled "Var. 1.", starting with "I'm (a) poor wes - tern cow - boy." The music includes various rhythmic patterns like eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. Measures are grouped by vertical bar lines and some are bracketed in threes (e.g., measures 3-5, 7-9).

\* Motives similar to this and the form in the melody alternate regularly for the beginning of the third line.

## Negro Folk Songs

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

When I was a cowboy out on de western plains,  
When I was a cowboy out on de western plains,  
I made a half a million, pullin' on de bridle reins.  
Come-a-cow-cow-yicky, cow-cow-yicky-yicky-yea.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

The cowboy had been out on de western plains. He had made so many dollars, he had come back an' wanted to carry all his friends and relations out dere, so they could get rich like he done. When he got ready to go, he rode all around; he wanted to know who was goin'. And here what he told 'em:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Come all you cowboys, don' you want to go?  
Come all you cowboys, don' you want to go?  
To see the rangers in the range of the buffalo."  
Come-a-cow-cow-yicky, cow-cow-yicky-yicky-yea.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

When he rode up to his girl's house, he was settin' deep down in his saddle.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Feets in my stirrups, settin' deep down in my saddle,  
Feets in my stirrups, settin' deep down in my saddle,  
I'm the best cowboy that ever herded cattle.  
Come-a-cow-cow-yicky, cow-cow-yicky-yicky-yea.

Went to his girl's house, she was settin' there alone;  
Went to his girl's house, she was settin' there alone;  
"I'm a po' western cowboy, great long ways from home."  
Come-a-cow-cow-yicky, cow-cow-yicky-yicky-yea.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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When he lef' his girl's house, she was rockin' in a rockin' cheer;  
When he lef' his girl's house, she was rockin' in a rockin' cheer;  
"A po' western cowboy—please doncha leave me here."  
Come-a-cow-cow-yicky, cow-cow-yicky-yicky-yea.

Wo, de hardes' battle was ever on Bunker's Hill,  
Wo, de hardes' battle was ever on Bunker's Hill,  
When me an' a bunch o' cowboys run into Buffalo Bill.  
Come-a-cow-cow-yicky, cow-cow-yicky-yicky-yea.

Wo, de hardes' battle was ever on de western plains,  
Wo, de hardes' battle was ever on de western plains,  
When me an' a bunch o' cowboys run into Jesse James.  
Come-a-cow-cow-yicky, cow-cow-yicky-yicky-yea.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

This here's de las' verse. De cowboys had drinked up about two, three gallyons. They done made their horses drunk. They done made their forty-fives drunk. They went to a man's house outa town, an' they was ragin'. They was ridin' 'roun' that man's house, an' their hosses was a-walkin'; an' their forty-fives was a-talkin'. An' here's the las' word the cowboys said to de man:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"If yo' house catch afire an' dey ain' no water roun',  
If yo' house catch afire an' dey ain' no water roun',  
Throw yo' jelly \* out de window, let de doggone shack burn down."  
Come-a-cow-cow-yicky, cow-cow-yicky-yicky-yea.

\* A word of many meanings. Short for "jelly roll," which can signify a "shimmy" dance or serve as an apt descriptive metaphor. "Jelly" can also mean "big fat woman wid de meat shakin' on her bone" or simply "woman."

BECKY DEAN

The levee worker was generally a pretty hard case, as likely as not a murderer or an escaped convict. The levee-camp woman had to be even more hard-bitten, and Becky Dean, the only levee woman to have a ballad-epitaph, must have been a regular hellcat. She made her living shooting craps, playing cooncan and dealing monte; and she was a person who wouldn't stand for any monkey business. As the song says, however, she did have her redeeming qualities. One day, in East St. Louis, when she was down to her last dime and was mighty dry, she didn't buy a drink but spent it all "on de sake of de man of mine."

Lead Belly picked the song up from some levee-camp men who came, during a lay-off, to help his father with the cotton picking. "These mens was gamblers. Heard them talkin' 'bout Becky Dean—heard them singin' some few words; an' I put the rest of the song in there myself."

Dr. George Herzog of Columbia University says that this is a typical Anglo-American ballad tune. So far as the stanzas go, however, they stem from the Negro blues and the levee-camp songs.

*Dignified, full throated*

$\text{♩} = \text{about } 69$ , somewhat free

Beck - eh      Dean,      she was a gam - blin' gal;

She winned the mon - ey      an'      she winned it

fair.              Beck - eh      Dean,      she

### As Sung by Lead Belly

was a gam-blín' gal; She winned the mon-ey  
an' she winned it fair.

Becky Dean, she was a gamblin' gal;  
She winned de money, an' she winned it fair.  
Becky Dean, she was a gamblin' gal;  
She winned de money, an' she winned it fair.

Becky Dean, she had her games on the groun',  
She winned all the money the skinners laid down.  
Becky Dean, she had her games on the groun',  
She winned all the money the skinners laid down.

#### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

This man an' this woman was gamblin'. He tried to take de money up when he had los'—he was jivin' de woman. He thought she di'n' know no better. But when she foun' de money was gone, she grabbed a singletree lyin' on de levee an' draw back.

#### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

She started to hit one wid a singletree,  
Might 'a' heared de rascal holl'in', "Honey, doncha murder me."  
She started to hit one wid a singletree,  
Might 'a' heared de rascal holl'in', "Honey, doncha murder me."

Becky Dean walked all de way f'om Eas' St. Louis,  
When she didn' have but de one thin dime;  
Didn' spen' it for whisky, honey, an' neither for wine,  
She spent it all on "de sake of de man of mine."

## Negro Folk Songs

This is the las' word that Becky Dean said,  
"I love my baby when he's dead."

This is the las' word that Becky Dean said,  
"I love my baby when he's dead."

### TAKE A WHIFF ON ME

An early representative of the same great indigenous tradition as "Willie the Weeper" and "Cocaine Lil"—the tradition that Cab Calloway has made capital out of with his "Minnie the Moocher" and his "Funny Reefer Man"—this song, with all its exuberance, may have originated among the "snowbirds," but certainly its popularity is due to the American, particularly the American college student's, taste for vicarious vice.

A fairly well known song among Negroes in the South, probably from the minstrel shows. With Lead Belly, who learned it from his Uncle Terrell Ledbetter, it has lost most of its original meaning and has become just another ragtime tune for dancing.

*Swift, happy*  
 $\text{♩} = 192-224$

Walked up El-lum an' I come down Main,  
Tryin' to bum a nick-el jes' to buy co-caine.  
Ho, ho, ba-by, take a whip on me.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

Chorus:

Take a whip on me, take a whip on me,  
An'-ah ev'-ry-bo-dy take a whip on me,  
Ho, ho, ba-by, take a whip on me.

*A variant of the first line of the Chorus:\**

Take a whip on me, take a whip on me,  
Ho, ho, baby, take a whip on me,

\* The two forms of the chorus alternate irregularly.

Walked up Ellum an' I come down Main,\*  
Tryin' to bum a nickel, jes' to buy cocaine.  
Ho, ho, baby, take a whiff on me.

Chorus: †

Take a whiff on me, take a whiff on me,  
An'-ah ev'ybody take a whiff on me,  
Ho, ho, baby, take a whiff on me.

When I marry gonna buy me a rope,  
Gonna whiff my baby till she buzzard-lope. ‡  
Ho, ho, baby, take a whiff on me.

\* Two streets in Dallas, Texas.

† Repeat chorus as often as you feel like it.

‡ A dance step similar, perhaps, to the now popular "Lindbird hop."

## Negro Folk Songs

---

Blacker de berry, de sweeter de juice,  
Takes a brown-skin woman for my purtickeler use.  
Ho, ho, baby, take a whiff on me.

Tell you somepin' gwine make you mighty tickle,  
Two bottles o' cocaine gwine fer a nickel.  
Ho, ho, baby, take a whiff on me.

You take Sal an' I'll take Sue,  
It's a mighty little diffunce in atween dem two.  
Ho, ho, baby, take a whiff on me.

You take Sal an' I take Jane,  
Dey bofe good-lookin', but dey ain' de same.  
Ho, ho, baby, take a whiff on me.

Whiffaree an' a whiffarye,  
Gonna keep on a-whiffin' till de day I die.  
Ho, ho, baby, take a whiff on me.

Cocaine for horses an' not for men,  
Doctors say it'll kill you, but dey don' say when.  
Ho, ho, baby, take a whiff on me.

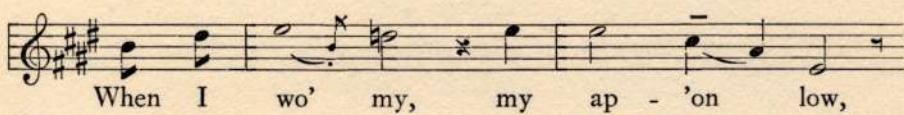
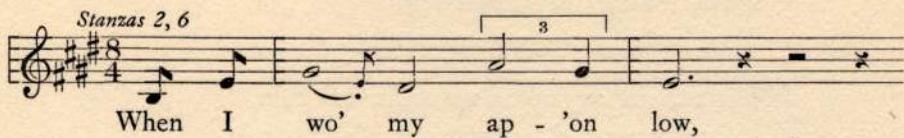
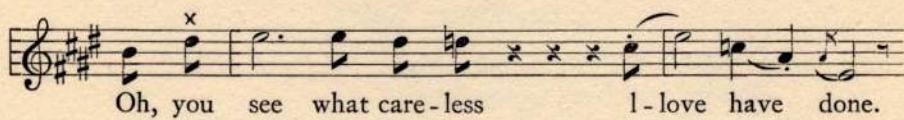
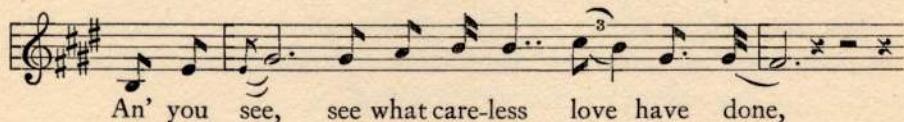
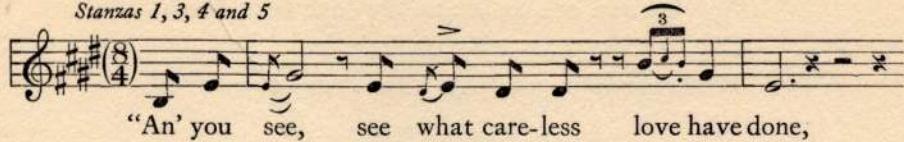
Two barrels o' pickle po'k an' two barrels o' meal,  
An' oh, how glad de ol' lady feels.  
Ho, ho, baby, take a whiff on me.

## CARELESS LOVE

A grim, bitter, passionate song from the mountains—with Negro additions.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

*Smoothly, with feeling*  
♩=116-172, somewhat free  
Stanzas 1, 3, 4 and 5



\* Here, as often, Lead Belly jumbles the meaning.

## Negro Folk Songs

---

"An' you see, see what careless love have done,  
An' you see, see what careless love have done,  
Oh, you see what careless love have done,  
Made me love you, now your man done come."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

She was walkin' along, an' she saw the rascal passin' by. He had run her away f'om his do', an' she didn't have nowhere to go. She looked at him, an' she commence to cry:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"When I wo' my ap'on low,  
When I wo' my ap'on low,  
When I wo' my, my ap'on low,  
Daddy, you drove me, honey, f'om yo' do'.

"Now, I wears my ap'on high,  
You looks at me and passes by.  
Now, I wears my ap'on high,  
You looks at me and passes by.

"I'm wearin' my ap'on up under my chin,  
You pass my do', an' you wouldn't come in.  
I'm wearin' my ap'on up under my chin,  
You pass my do', an' you wouldn't come in.

"Now, you see, see what careless love will do,  
Make you kill yourself an' your sweetheart, too.  
Now, you see, see what careless love will do,  
Make you kill yourself an' your sweetheart, too.

"Lawd, you see, see what careless love have done,  
Make your grandma marry her oldes' son.  
Lawd, you see, see what careless love have done,  
Make your grandma marry her oldes' son.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

“Lawd, have mercy on me.  
You see, Lawd, baby, don’ you see?  
Lawd, have mercy on me.  
You see, Lawd, baby, don’ you see?”

### DE MIDNIGHT SPECIAL

A song popular among both Negro and white American jailbirds.

The musical score consists of six staves of music in common time (indicated by '4') and treble clef. The tempo is marked as  $\text{♩} = 160-184$ . The lyrics are integrated into the music, with each line of text corresponding to a specific staff. The first staff contains the lyrics "Yon (-der) come Miss - a Ro - sie." The second staff contains "How in de worl' do you know?" The third staff contains "Well, I knows her by de ap - 'on". The fourth staff contains "An' de dress she wo'; Um - be - rel - ler on (her)". The fifth staff contains "shoul - de', Piece o' pa - per in her han'. The sixth staff contains "Well, she's gon - na tell de gov' - nor," followed by the page number "[ 221 ]".

## Negro Folk Songs

"Please, turn a-loose - a my man." Let de mid-night spe - cial  
Shine its light on me, Let de mid - n-night spe - cial  
Shine a ev - er - lo - vin' light on me.

*Var. 1. 2.*

"Yonder come Miss Rosie."  
"How in de worl' do you know?"  
"Well, I knows her by de ap'on  
An' de dress she wo';  
Umbereller on her shoulde',  
Piece o' paper in her han'.  
Well, she's gonna tell de gov'nor,  
Please, turn a-loose-a my man."

### *Chorus:*

Let de midnight special  
Shine its light on me;  
Let de midnight special  
Shine a ever-lovin' light on me.

When you wake up in de mawnin',  
When de ding-dong ring,  
Go marchin' to de table,  
Meet de same ol' thing.  
Knife an' fork-a on de table,  
Nothin' in my pan;

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

Ever say anything about it,  
Have's trouble wid de man.

Ef you ever go to Houston,  
Boy, you better walk right,  
Well, you better not squabble,  
An' you better not fight.  
Bason an' Brock will arres' you,  
Payton an' Boone will take you down;  
The judge will sentence you,  
An' you Sugar Lan' boun'.

Well, jumpin' li'l' Judy  
Was a mighty fine girl,  
Well, Judy brought jumpin' \*  
To dis whole roun' worl'.  
Well, she brought it in de mornin'  
Jus' while 'fo' day,  
An' she brought me de news  
Dat my wife was dead.

Dat started me to grievin',  
'Hoppin', holl'in' an' a-cryin',  
Then I begin to worry  
'Bout my great long time.

## GOVERNOR PAT NEFF

According to Lead Belly this governor declared that when elected he wouldn't "turn his own mammy loose"; but he gave Lead Belly a pardon when he heard him sing this song.

\* "Jumpin'" may mean the motion of a particular dance, some sexual motion or simply working fast.

## Negro Folk Songs

*Quick*  
*=80-100*



Nine - teen hun - dred (and) twen - ty - three De

judge took my lib - er - ty 'way from me,

Left my wife wring - in' her hands and cryin',

"Lawd have mer - cy on de man of mine."

Chorus:  
"Good - by, Ma - ry,"      Oh, Ma - ry.

half-spoken: . . . >  
"Good - by, Ma - ry,"      Oh, Ma - ry."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

This here's a song I compose to Governor Pat Neff so that he would 'prieve me from de thirty years I had in de Texas penitentiary. When he come to visit Camp A, Imperial State Farm, he had his wife and a carful o' ladies wid him. They all listen when I sing the song I had compose to Governor Pat Neff.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Nineteen hundred and twenty-three  
De judge took my liberty away from me,\*  
Nineteen hundred and twenty-three  
De judge took my liberty away from me.

Left my wife wringin' her hands and cryin',  
"Lawd have mercy on de man of mine."  
Left my wife wringin' her hands an' cryin',  
"Lawd have mercy on de man of mine."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Bud Russell, which traveled all over de state and carried de men  
on down de state penitentiary, had me goin' on down. Had chains  
all around my neck, an' I couldn't do nothin' but wave my hands. I  
look back at Mary, and here what I told her.†

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Told my wife 'fore I left de lan',  
Never no more see her, do de best she can.  
Told my wife 'fore I left de lan',  
Never no more see her, do de best she can.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Her name was Mary. Look back at Mary—

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Good-by, Mary,  
Oh, Mary.  
Good-by, Mary,  
Oh, Mary."

\* The year was actually 1918, but Lead Belly needed an easy rhyme word.

† As he sang to Governor Neff, he inserted no explanation, of course. See Part I, pp. 9, 14-15.

## Negro Folk Songs

---

LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Then I began to talk to Governor Pat Neff,

LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"I am your servant, compose this song,  
Please, Governor Neff, lemme go back home  
I am your servant, compose this song,  
Please, Governor Neff, lemme go back home."

LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Had thirty years!

LEAD BELLY SINGS:

I know my wife gonna jump and shout  
When the train rolls up and I come stepping out.  
I know my wife gonna jump and shout  
When the train rolls up and I come stepping out.

LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

I know she be pretty glad. I know I be glad, myself.

LEAD BELLY SINGS:

I know my wife gonna jump and shout,  
Train rolls up and I come stepping out.  
I know my wife gonna jump and shout,  
Train rolls up and I come stepping out.

LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

I looked around and begin to thank Governor Pat Neff. I wanted him to have a little mercy on me because I had thirty years.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Please, Governor Neff, be good and kind,  
Have mercy on my great, long time.  
Please, Governor Neff, be good and kind,  
Have mercy on my great, long time."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

They was turn' loose, some on pardon, some on parole. Some  
they's cuttin' they time.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

If I don't git a pardon, try me on a parole."  
If I don't git a pardon, try me on a parole.  
I don't see to save my soul,  
If I don't git a pardon, try me on a parole."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

He ask me where did I want to go and I told him:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Goin' back to Mary,  
Oh, Mary.  
Lawdy, Mary,  
Um-hum-hum."

Some folks say it's a sin,  
Got too many women and too many men.  
Some folks say it's a sin,  
Got too many women and too many men.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

In de pen.

## Negro Folk Songs

---

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Some folks say it's a sin,  
Got too many women and too many men.  
"Please, Governor Neff, be good and kind,  
If I don't get a pardon, will you cut my time?"

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

He give me a pardon.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Had you, Governor Neff, like you got me,  
I'd wake up in de mornin', an' I'd set you free.  
Had you, Governor Neff, like you got me,  
I'd wake up in de mornin', an' I'd set you free."

## THE SHREVEPORT JAIL \*

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

This here's a song about de Shrevepo't jail. An' when de judge sentence you, you down in de valley. † I made this song when I was down on Angola. I was down in de valley so low I could not hear them Shrevepo't trains blow. I was in de fiel's, workin' hard one evenin'. I 'gin to think about Shreveport, Lou'siana. I think about how de lawyer done me. I think about how de sheriff put me in jail. I begin to sit down there an' make me up an ol' song.

\* Same melody as "Governor O. K. Allen."

† In jail, in the penitentiary.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

Musical notation for "Way down in de val-ley". The tempo is 138-168 BPM. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The time signature starts at 2/4 and changes to 3/4 for the first line. The lyrics are: Way down in de val-ley, In de val-ley so low, Till I jes' could not hear that Eve - nin' train whis - tle blow. A variation begins with "Var. 1." and includes a measure with a 3/4 time signature.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Way down in de valley,  
In de valley so low,  
Till I jes' could not hear that  
Evenin' train whistle blow.

When you write me a letter,  
Please send it by mail,  
You can send it all over  
That Shrevepo't jail.

Oh, the sheriff, he will 'rest you,  
Bound you over in jail,  
Can't get nobody  
To go your bail.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

You git you a lawyer for your friend. An' when you come to find out yourself, you's somewhere wid a thousan' years in de pen.

## Negro Folk Songs

---

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Send for your lawyer,  
Come down to yo' cell,  
He'll swear he can clear you  
In spite of all hell.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

He gonna get de bigges' of your money an' come back for some more.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Git some o' your money,  
Come back for de res'.  
Tell you to plead guilty,  
For he know it is bes'.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

There sit the judge. You ain' thinkin' 'bout him. You got to go befo' de judge.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Oh, de judge he will sentence you,  
Clerk will write it down,  
You can bet yo' bottom dollar,  
You Angola-boun'.

There sets de judge,  
I like to forgot,  
De damnedes' rascal  
De state ever picked out.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

When de judge give you life-time, dey ain' nothin' you can look up to but de good Lawd in de sky. The angels up in de heaven gonna take care of you.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Oh, de roses is red  
An' de vi'lets blue,  
An' de angels in heaven  
Sing, "I love you."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Now dis here's de las' verse:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

When you write me a letter,  
Please send it by mail,  
You can 'dress it all over  
Dat Shrevepo't jail.

## GOVERNOR O. K. ALLEN

When Huey Long was Governor of Louisiana, Lead Belly "composed" a pardon song, had it copied, and sent it to Baton Rouge. So touched was Huey that he had the song published in the newspapers as Long advertising, and that was the last Lead Belly heard of it. True enough, he had taken little trouble in its composition, merely changing names and dates in his Governor Neff song to fit the Louisiana circumstances.

Hearing that a new governor had been inaugurated, Lead Belly sat down one evening and dictated the words of the following appeal to a buddy of his. He tried every tune in his songbag to see which one fitted, finally deciding upon "The Shreveport Jail." (Notice with what shrewdness, by the way, Lead Belly chose the tunes for his two pardon songs. Both were direct Negro modifications of white melodies, just the sort of tunes the average white man likes best to

## Negro Folk Songs

hear Negroes sing. Other Negro songs he is likely to call "hollering.") Lead Belly had his new song copied and sent to the governor, but got no response, since it is eminently a song to be heard and not read. He sang it to every white person he could reach, and finally we came along and recorded it, and took it to the Governor. A month later Lead Belly was paroled, and, although the Commissioner of the Louisiana Prison System, Mr. Hymes, says no, Lead Belly and we like to believe this song won him his freedom. At least one can safely say that, but for his singing and guitar playing, Lead Belly would still be on the Angola prison farm.

*d=72-92 First stanza*

*d=92 Final stanza*

*largo, d=52*

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

In nineteen hundred and thirty-two,  
Honorable Governor O. K. Allen, I'm appealin' to you.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Now this song I compose in nineteen-thirty-two. I sung it on up into nineteen-thirty-four. And on the first day of July the good, cool, kind boss, better known as Mr. John A. Lomax, and his son, better known as Mr. Alan Lomax, they come down to the Louisiana State Penitentiary, which is at Angola. The boss told me, says, "This song you made about Governor O. K. Allen," says, "if you'll sing it through my mikeaphone, I'll take it to Governor O. K. Allen for you." I thanked him, says, "Boss, if you take it to Governor O. K. Allen, I sho believe he'll turn me a-loose." And sho 'nough de boss, I sung this song to him, and he taken it to Baton Rouge; and one month from that day Governor O. K. Allen told me to go home.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

I left my wife wringin' her hands an' cryin',  
Sayin', "Governor O. K. Allen, save this man of mine."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Mr. Hymes was runnin' all through de penitentiary system—he was de General Manager, next to the Governor O. K. Allen—seein' how many mens they had. Well, de penitentiary was runnin' over wid men, and they had to make some 'rangements to turn some o' them loose. They started 'prievin' them out in nineteen hundred and thirty-two, and the first number was three hundred and twenty-five.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

And Honorable Mr. Hymes looked over de pen,  
Told Governor O. K. Allen, "You've got too many men."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Governor O. K. Allen began to get up and turn around to try to do a little somepin' about turning some of them loose.

## Negro Folk Songs

---

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Governor O. K. Allen begin to turn about,  
"Got to make some 'rangements to turn some of them out."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Warden Long was Governor Huey P. Long's first cousin. Mr. Hymes goes and tells Warden Long the 'rangements him and Governor O. K. Allen done made.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

And Honorable Mr. Hymes says to Honorable Warden Long,  
"Done made some 'rangements to let the man go home."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

When I looked in the *Shreveport Times*—was our paper out of Shreveport, Louisiana—the first number I saw was three hundred and twenty-five.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

I looked in the paper and I was surprised,  
When I saw the number—three hundred and twenty-five.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

I begin to think about the woman I had left behind in Shreveport, Louisiana.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

I know my wife gonna jump and shout,  
When the train rolls up and I come steppin' out.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

I begin to praise Governor O. K. Allen for the kindness he had done. He hadn't turned me loose, but I b'lieve when he heard this song he gonna turn me loose.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Governor O. K. Allen, 'member you the rest of my life,  
You studied up a plan to send so many men to they wives.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

---

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

I wanted all the boys to think about Mr. Fournet's son, who was Lieutenant Governor behind Governor O. K. Allen and head of the board of pardons at New Orleans. His name was Mister Fournet. When they write a letter to the pardon board, I want 'em to mention his name in the letter.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

When you write you a letter, please don't forget,  
Lieutenant Gov'nor, Honorable Mr. Fournet.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

And here's the last verse I said to Governor O. K. Allen and here's just what he done.

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Had you, Governor O. K. Allen, like you got me,  
I'd wake up in de mornin', let you out on reprieve.

## IRENE

Before Lead Belly was sentenced for murder in Texas, he learned the refrain of this song with a couple of verses from his Uncle Terrell. He sang it throughout the penitentiary system (where it is now one of the most popular songs), adding verses as he thought of them, filling out the details of the song until it had developed into a semi-ballad. When he went to Angola, he took "Irene" and his twelve-string guitar. "Irene" was his most popular song with the convicts, the guards, and the visitors whom he entertained.

The melody is certainly not a Negro folk melody. A gentleman in Providence, Rhode Island, believes he heard the same air on a ranch in west Texas twenty years ago. One of the old-line members of the Communist party in New York insisted that it was a steal from a famous aria in "Martha." Sigmund Spaeth, the tune detective, had never heard it, but agrees with us that it is of the Stephen Foster or "Sweet Adeline" vintage and certainly of written origin. However

## Negro Folk Songs

mysterious its background, we prophesy that it will some day be one of the best known American folk songs. The reception it has had from audiences as different as the Modern Language Association smoker in Philadelphia \* and the assembled convicts of the Atmore Prison in Alabama testifies to this.

As it is given below it stands as a *tour de force* of ballad-making—using a sweet, sentimental song from the nineteenth century to tell a realistic, salty story of Negro married life. No one but Lead Belly would have dared such blithe liberties with the tradition of soft sentimental songs as to remark after singing “Irene, Good Night”: “You can buy her an automobile an’ she won’t come back—an’ you know they’s crazy ’bout an automobile.” The repetitious, sugary refrain and the equally syrupy stanzas—contrast these with the blunt speech of Irene and her boy-friend, Lead Belly’s salty observations, and the fierce, soft casualness of the drama. The contrast is characteristically American.

*Slow and sentimental*  
♩ = 42-56

I ask your mother for you,  
She told me you was too young;  
I wish to de Lawd I never seen your face,  
I'm sor-ry you ev-er was a-born.

\* Lead Belly sat on the speakers' table and sang to the evident pleasure of this learned audience.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

Chorus:

I - rene, good ni - ight, I - rene, good night,  
Good night, I - rene, good night, I - rene.

I'll kiss you in my dreams.

2nd Stanza:

Some - times I lives in de coun - try,  
Some - times I lives in town,  
Some - times I have a great no - tion,  
Jump-in' in - to de ri - ver an' drown.

Var. 1.      2.      3.

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### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

*Chorus:*

Irene, good night,  
Irene, good night,  
Good night, Irene, good night, Irene,  
I'll kiss you in my dreams.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

This here song was made about a man an' a girl was walkin' along one Sunday evenin'. Jus' befo' this girl an' man got to de house, she said, "You ask mother for me, when you get home." The man tol' her, "All right." He goes an' ask de woman for her daughter, an' the woman didn't have but one chil' in de worl' an' that's this li'l' girl. An' the las' chil' she had, you might know what she tol' de man. She didn't git mad wid him an' she didn't talk rough, but she tol' him. An' he went back to de girl an' she say, "What did mamma tell you?" He looked at Irene—her name was Irene—an' here what he said:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"I ask your mother for you;  
She told me you was too young;  
I wish to de Lawd I never seen your face,  
I'm sorry you ever was a-born."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

What was it about?

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Irene, good night,  
Irene, good night,  
Good night, Irene, good night, Irene,  
I'll kiss you in my dreams.

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Irene didn' like what he said. So he walked away from her wid his head hung down, but she call him back an' tol' him, says: "Now, listen. Mamma won' give me up; but if you slip back here at twelve o'clock, I'll slip off wid you, an' you an' I will marry." He tol' her, "All right." She says, "Jus' before you go—I wants to marry a town man." (That man was a sorta stranger to her, but she liked him. Anyhow she had been at home too long.) He knowed he lived ninety miles in de country. Wasn' even much of a country store around him. Two chances to one he never had been to town befo' in his life. But he looked at Irene an' here what he tol' her:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Sometimes I lives in de country,  
Sometimes I lives in town,  
Sometimes I haves a great notion,  
Jumpin' into de river an' drown." \*

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

What was worr'in' him?

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Irene, good night,  
Irene, good night,  
Good night, Irene, good night, Irene,  
I'll kiss you in my dreams.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Sho 'nough the man come back there that night at twelve o'clock an' stole her away from home. He got her off in a strange place, an'

\* See Odum and Johnson, *Negro Workaday Songs*, p. 130, where the same verse appears under "Diamond Joe."

## Negro Folk Songs

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he didn' stay at home wid her nary night. So he had stole her away f'om home, an' she looked at him when he come in one night, she sit down an' she wanted to talk to him:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"You caused me to weep an' you caused me to moan,  
You caused me to leave my home—"  
Last word I heared her say,  
"I want you to sing me a song."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

What was de song?

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Irene, good night,  
Irene, good night,  
Good night, Irene, good night, Irene,  
I'll kiss you in my dreams.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

An' sho 'nough ev'y time night come, he was gone. He was a good gambler. What you mean—a good gambler—he never win a bet an' never had a cent in his pocket.\* Ev'y nickel he could rake or scrape, he'd gamble it away an' leave him wid a clean pocket, leave his wife at home wid nothin' to eat. She was hungry and he had her off in a strange place. She sat down an' cross her legs. She poke her finger in his face an' say:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Quit ramblin' an quit gamblin',  
Quit stayin' out late at night,  
Stay home wid yo' wife an' yo' fam'ly,  
Sit down by de fireside bright."

\* Lead Belly doesn't gamble, "never has and never will."

## As Sung by Lead Belly

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Irene, good night,  
Irene, good night,  
Good night, Irene, good night, Irene.  
I'll kiss you in my dreams.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

Sho 'nough she tol' him, say, "If you don' stay at home wid me, I'm gonna leave you." But he didn' believe twice fo' was eight an' he didn' believe twice ten was twenty. But he went off one night too many. Now I'll tell you 'bout a woman. When they makin' up they min' to leave you, nothin' in de worl' gonna stop 'em. She'll git ag'inst you an' you cain' beg her back. You cain' buy her back. You can buy her a automobile an' she won't come back—an' you know they's crazy about a automobile. So when he lef', he came back an' he found a clean house. Wasn't a rag in it. He could walk right straight on through that house. All de do's was open, an' Irene was gone. So he walked out onto the back side of de house, an here what he said in his min':

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"Last Sat'day night I got married,  
Me an' my wife settled down.  
Now me an' my wife have parted,  
Gwine take me a stroll uptown."

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

What was he trouble' about?

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

Irene, good night,  
Irene, good night,  
Good night, Irene, good night, Irene.  
I'll kiss you in my dreams.

## Negro Folk Songs

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### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

When he come an' he found his wife was gone, he walked out an' he looks for Irene. When he found his wife, he goes to Irene, an' he falls down on his knees an' begs her to take him back. He falls down on his knees—I tell you 'bout a woman. She can love you to death, an' you can do her somepin' an' she hate you wussen she love you—an' Irene walked out, an' he was down on his knees. She put both hands on her hips an' say:

"You rack on away f'om me. I cain' use you no mo'. You cause me away f'om my mamma, an' I didn' have nowhere to go. I couldn' go back home, an' you wouldn' stay home wid me. Now I done foun' me a place to stay, an' you jus' might as well as to stay away."

He lef' Irene an' here what he said:

### LEAD BELLY SINGS:

"I love Irene, God knows I do,  
Love her till the sea runs dry;  
An' ef Irene turns her back on me,  
I'm gonna take morphine an' die." \*

Irene, good night,  
Irene, good night,  
Good night, Irene, good night, Irene.  
I'll kiss you in my dreams.

### LEAD BELLY SPEAKS:

He walked away from Irene wid his head hung down, cryin', an' here de las' verse he said.

(Lead Belly concludes with a "moan," prolonged for a full stanza.)

Um-m-m . . .

\* This stanza has its roots in some Elizabethan lyric.

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AS Sung by LEAD BELLY

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